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GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

JOE ABERCROMBIE

SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE FIRST LAW TRILOGY



The First Law Trilogy

Joe Abercrombie

The Blade Itself
Before They Are Hanged
Last Argument of Kings

About the Author:

Joe Abercrombie is the Sunday Times bestselling author of The Heroes, Best Served Cold and the First Law trilogy: The Blade Itself, Before They Are Hanged and Last Argument of Kings. He is a full-time writer and occasional freelance film editor, who lives in Bath with his wife and children.

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**JOE
ABERCROMBIE**

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*The Blade
Itself*

'Delightfully twisted
and evil'

GUARDIAN

For the Four Readers

You know who you are

THE FIRST LAW: BOOK ONE

JOE
ABERCROMBIE

THE BLADE ITSELF



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The End

Logen plunged through the trees, bare feet slipping and sliding on the wet earth, the slush, the wet pine needles, breath rasping in his chest, blood thumping in his head. He stumbled and sprawled onto his side, nearly cut his chest open with his own axe, lay there panting, peering through the shadowy forest.

The Dogman had been with him until a moment before, he was sure, but there wasn't any sign of him now. As for the others, there was no telling. Some leader, getting split up from his boys like that. He should've been trying to get back, but the Shanka were all around. He could feel them moving between the trees, his nose was full of the smell of them. Sounded as if there was some shouting somewhere on his left, fighting maybe. Logen crept slowly to his feet, trying to stay quiet. A twig snapped and he whipped round.

There was a spear coming at him. A cruel-looking spear, coming at him fast with a Shanka on the other end of it.

'Shit,' said Logen. He threw himself to one side, slipped and fell on his face, rolled away thrashing through the brush, expecting the spear through his back at any moment. He scrambled up, breathing hard. He saw the bright point poking at him again, dodged out of the way, slithered behind a big tree trunk. He peered out and the Flathead hissed and stabbed at him. He showed himself on the other side, just for a moment, then ducked away, jumped round the tree and swung the axe down, roaring loud as he could. There was a crack as the blade buried itself deep in the Shanka's skull. Lucky that, but then Logen reckoned he was due a little luck.

The Flathead stood there, blinking at him. Then it started to sway from side to side, blood dribbling down its face. Then it dropped like a stone, dragging the axe from Logen's fingers, thrashing around on the ground at his feet. He tried to grab hold of his axe-handle but the Shanka still somehow had a grip on its spear and the point was flailing around in the air.

'Gah!' squawked Logen as the spear cut a nick in his arm. He felt a shadow fall across his face. Another Flathead. A damn big one. Already in the air, arms outstretched. No time to get the axe. No time to get out of the way. Logen's mouth opened, but there was no time to say anything. What do you say at a time like that?

They crashed to the wet ground together, rolled together through the dirt and the thorns and the broken branches, tearing and punching and growling at each other. A tree root hit Logen in the head, hard, and made his ears ring. He had a knife somewhere, but he couldn't remember where. They rolled on, and on, downhill, the world flipping and flipping around, Logen trying to shake the fuzz out of his head and throttle the big Flathead at the same time. There was no stopping.

It had seemed a clever notion to pitch camp near the gorge. No chance of

anyone sneaking up behind. Now, as Logen slid over the edge of the cliff on his belly, the idea lost much of its appeal. His hands scrabbled at the wet earth. Only dirt and brown pine needles. His fingers clutched, clutched at nothing. He was beginning to fall. He let go a little whimper.

His hands closed around something. A tree root, sticking out from the earth at the very edge of the gorge. He swung in space, gasping, but his grip was firm.

‘Hah!’ he shouted. ‘Hah!’ He was still alive. It would take more than a few Flatheads to put an end to Logen Ninefingers. He started to pull himself up onto the bank but couldn’t manage it. There was some great weight around his legs. He peered down.

The gorge was deep. Very deep with sheer, rocky sides. Here and there a tree clung to a crack, growing out into the empty air and spreading its leaves into space. The river hissed away far below, fast and angry, foaming white water fringed by jagged black stone. That was all bad, for sure, but the real problem was closer to hand. The big Shanka was still with him, swinging gently back and forth with its dirty hands clamped tight around his left ankle.

‘Shit,’ muttered Logen. It was quite a scrape he was in. He’d been in some bad ones alright, and lived to sing the songs, but it was hard to see how this could get much worse. That got him thinking about his life. It seemed a bitter, pointless sort of a life now. No one was any better off because of it. Full of violence and pain, with not much but disappointment and hardship in between. His hands were starting to tire now, his forearms were burning. The big Flathead didn’t look like it was going to fall off any time soon. In fact, it had dragged itself up his leg a way. It paused, glaring up at him.

If Logen had been the one clinging to the Shanka’s foot, he would most likely have thought, ‘My life depends on this leg I’m hanging from – best not take any chances.’ A man would rather save himself than kill his enemy. Trouble was that the Shanka didn’t think that way, and Logen knew it. So it wasn’t much of a surprise when it opened its big mouth and sank its teeth into his calf.

‘Aaaargh!’ Logen grunted, and squealed and kicked out as hard as he could with his bare heel, kicked a bloody gash in the Shanka’s head, but it wouldn’t stop biting, and the harder he kicked, the more his hands slipped on the greasy root above. There wasn’t much root left to hold on to, now, and what there was looked like snapping off any moment. He tried to think past the pain in his hands, the pain in his arms, the Flathead’s teeth in his leg. He was going to fall. The only choice was between falling on rocks or falling on water, and that was a choice that more or less made itself.

Once you’ve got a task to do, it’s better to do it than to live with the fear of it. That’s what Logen’s father would have said. So he planted his free foot firmly on the rock face, took one last deep breath, and flung himself out into empty space with all the strength he had left. He felt the biting teeth let go of him, then the grasping hands, and for a moment he was free.

Then he began to fall. Fast. The sides of the gorge flashed past – grey rock, green moss, patches of white snow, all tumbling around him.

Logen turned over slowly in the air, limbs flailing pointlessly, too scared to scream. The rushing wind whipped at his eyes, tugged at his clothes, plucked

the breath out of his mouth. He saw the big Shanka hit the rock face beside him. He saw it break and bounce and flop off, dead for sure. That was a pleasing sight, but Logen's satisfaction was short-lived.

The water came up to meet him. It hit him in the side like a charging bull, punched the air out of his lungs, knocked the sense out of his head, sucked him in and down into the cold darkness . . .

PART I

‘The blade itself incites to deeds of violence’

Homer

The Survivors

The lapping of water in his ears. That was the first thing. The lapping of water, the rustling of trees, the odd click and twitter of a bird.

Logen opened his eyes a crack. Light, blurry bright through leaves. This was death? Then why did it hurt so much? His whole left side was throbbing. He tried to take a proper breath, choked, coughed up water, spat out mud. He groaned, flopped over onto his hands and knees, dragged himself up out of the river, gasping through clenched teeth, rolled onto his back in the moss and slime and rotten sticks at the water's edge.

He lay there for a moment, staring up at the grey sky beyond the black branches, breath wheezing in his raw throat.

'I am still alive,' he croaked to himself. Still alive, in spite of the best efforts of nature, Shanka, men and beasts. Soaking wet and flat on his back, he started to chuckle. Reedy, gurgling laughter. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's a survivor.

A cold wind blew across the rotting river bank, and Logen's laughter slowly died. Alive he might be, but staying alive, that was another question. He sat up, wincing at the pain. He tottered to his feet, leaning against the nearest tree trunk. He scraped the dirt out of his nose, his eyes, his ears. He pulled up his wet shirt to take a look at the damage.

His side was covered in bruises from the fall. Blue and purple stains all up his ribs. Tender to the touch, and no mistake, but it didn't feel like anything was broken. His leg was a mess. Torn and bloody from the Shanka's teeth. It hurt bad, but his foot still moved well enough, and that was the main thing. He'd need his foot, if he was going to get out of this.

He still had his knife in the sheath at his belt, and he was mightily glad to see it. You could never have too many knives in Logen's experience, and this was a good one, but the outlook was still bleak. He was on his own, in woods crawling with Flatheads. He had no idea where he was, but he could follow the river. The rivers all flowed north, from the mountains to the cold sea. Follow the river southwards, against the current. Follow the river and climb up, into the High Places where the Shanka couldn't find him. That was his only chance.

It would be cold up there, this time of year. Deadly cold. He looked down at his bare feet. It was just his luck that the Shanka had come while he had his boots off, trimming his blisters. No coat either – he'd been sitting near the fire. Like this, he wouldn't last a day in the mountains. His hands and feet would turn black in the night, and he'd die bit by bit before he even reached the passes. If he didn't starve first.

'Shit,' he muttered. He had to go back to the camp. He had to hope the Flatheads had moved on, hope they'd left something behind. Something he could use to survive. That was an awful lot of hoping, but he had no choice.

He never had any choices.

It had started to rain by the time Logen found the place. Spitting drops that plastered his hair to his skull, kept his clothes wet through. He pressed himself against a mossy trunk and peered out towards the camp, heart pounding, fingers of his right hand curled painful tight around the slippery grip of his knife.

He saw the blackened circle where the fire had been, half-burned sticks and ash trampled round it. He saw the big log Threetrees and Dow had been sitting on when the Flatheads came. He saw odd bits of torn and broken gear scattered across the clearing. He counted three dead Shanka crumpled on the ground, one with an arrow poking out of its chest. Three dead ones, but no sign of any alive. That was lucky. Just lucky enough to survive, as always. Still, they might be back at any moment. He had to be quick.

Logen scuttled out from the trees, casting about on the ground. His boots were still there where he'd left them. He snatched them up and dragged them on to his freezing feet, hopping around, almost slipping in his haste. His coat was there too, wedged under the log, battered and scarred from ten years of weather and war, torn and stitched back together, missing half a sleeve. His pack was lying shapeless in the brush nearby, its contents strewn out down the slope. He crouched, breathless, throwing it all back inside. A length of rope, his old clay pipe, some strips of dried meat, needle and twine, a dented flask with some liquor still sloshing inside. All good. All useful.

There was a tattered blanket snagged on a branch, wet and half caked in grime. Logen pulled it up, and grinned. His old, battered cook pot was underneath. Lying on its side, kicked off the fire in the fight maybe. He grabbed hold of it with both hands. It felt safe, familiar, dented and blackened from years of hard use. He'd had that pot a long time. It had followed him all through the wars, across the North and back again. They had all cooked in it together, out on the trail, all eaten out of it. Forley, Grim, the Dogman, all of them.

Logen looked over the campsite again. Three dead Shanka, but none of his people. Maybe they were still out there. Maybe if he took a risk, tried to look

'No.' He said it quietly, under his breath. He knew better than that. There had been a lot of Flatheads. An awful lot. He had no idea how long he'd lain on the river bank. Even if a couple of the boys had got away, the Shanka would be hunting them, hunting them down in the forests. They were nothing but corpses now, for sure, scattered across the high valleys. All Logen could do was make for the mountains, and try to save his own sorry life. You have to be realistic. Have to be, however much it hurts.

'It's just you and me now,' said Logen as he stuffed the pot into his pack and threw it over his shoulder. He started to limp off, as fast as he could. Uphill, towards the river, towards the mountains.

Just the two of them. Him and the pot.

They were the only survivors.

Questions

Why do I do this? Inquisitor Glokta asked himself for the thousandth time as he limped down the corridor. The walls were rendered and whitewashed, though none too recently. There was a seedy feel to the place and a smell of damp. There were no windows, as the hallway was deep beneath the ground, and the lanterns cast slow flowing shadows into every corner.

Why would anyone want to do this? Glokta's walking made a steady rhythm on the grimy tiles of the floor. First the confident click of his right heel, then the tap of his cane, then the endless sliding of his left foot, with the familiar stabbing pains in the ankle, knee, arse and back. Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking.

The dirty monotony of the corridor was broken from time to time by a heavy door, bound and studded with pitted iron. On one occasion, Glokta thought he heard a muffled cry of pain from behind one. *I wonder what poor fool is being questioned in there? What crime they are guilty, or innocent of? What secrets are being picked at, what lies cut through, what treasons laid bare?* He didn't wonder long though. He was interrupted by the steps.

If Glokta had been given the opportunity to torture any one man, any one at all, he would surely have chosen the inventor of steps. When he was young and widely admired, before his misfortunes, he had never really noticed them. He had sprung down them two at a time and gone blithely on his way. No more. *They're everywhere. You really can't change floors without them. And down is worse than up, that's the thing people never realise. Going up, you usually don't fall that far.*

He knew this flight well. Sixteen steps, cut from smooth stone, a little worn toward the centre, slightly damp, like everything down here. There was no banister, nothing to cling to. *Sixteen enemies. A challenge indeed.* It had taken Glokta a long time to develop the least painful method of descending stairs. He went sideways like a crab. Cane first, then left foot, then right, with more than the usual agony as his left leg took his weight, joined by a persistent stabbing in the neck. *Why should it hurt in my neck when I go down stairs? Does my neck take my weight? Does it?* Yet the pain could not be denied.

Glokta paused four steps from the bottom. He had nearly beaten them. His hand was trembling on the handle of his cane, his left leg aching like fury. He tongued his gums where his front teeth used to be, took a deep breath and stepped forward. His ankle gave way with a horrifying wrench and he plunged into space, twisting, lurching, his mind a cauldron of horror and despair. He stumbled onto the next step like a drunkard, fingernails scratching at the smooth wall, giving a squeal of terror. *You stupid, stupid bastard!* His cane clattered to the floor, his clumsy feet wrestled with the stones and he found himself at the bottom, by some miracle still standing.

And here it is. That horrible, beautiful, stretched out moment between stubbing

your toe and feeling the hurt. How long do I have before the pain comes? How bad will it be when it does? Gasping, slack-jawed at the foot of the steps, Glokta felt a tingling of anticipation. *Here it comes . . .*

The agony was unspeakable, a searing spasm up his left side from foot to jaw. He squeezed his watering eyes tight shut, clamped his right hand over his mouth so hard that the knuckles clicked. His remaining teeth grated against each other as he locked his jaws together, but a high-pitched, jagged moan still whistled from him. *Am I screaming or laughing? How do I tell the difference?* He breathed in heaving gasps, through his nose, snot bubbling out onto his hand, his twisted body shaking with the effort of staying upright.

The spasm passed. Glokta moved his limbs cautiously, one by one, testing the damage. His leg was on fire, his foot numb, his neck clicked with every movement, sending vicious little stings down his spine. *Pretty good, considering.* He bent down with an effort and snatched up his cane between two fingers, drew himself up once more, wiped the snot and tears on the back of his hand. *Truly a thrill. Did I enjoy it? For most people stairs are a mundane affair. For me, an adventure!* He limped off down the corridor, giggling quietly to himself. He was still smiling ever so faintly when he reached his own door and shuffled inside.

A grubby white box with two doors facing each other. The ceiling was too low for comfort, the room too brightly lit by blazing lamps. Damp was creeping out of one corner and the plaster had erupted with flaking blisters, speckled with black mould. Someone had tried to scrub a long bloodstain from one wall, but hadn't tried nearly hard enough.

Practical Frost was standing on the other side of the room, big arms folded across his big chest. He nodded to Glokta, with all the emotion of a stone, and Glokta nodded back. Between them stood a scarred, stained wooden table, bolted to the floor and flanked by two chairs. A naked fat man sat in one of them, hands tied tightly behind him and with a brown canvas bag over his head. His quick, muffled breathing was the only sound. It was cold down here, but he was sweating. *As well he should be.*

Glokta limped over to the other chair, leaned his cane carefully against the edge of the table top and slowly, cautiously, painfully sat down. He stretched his neck to the left and right, then allowed his body to slump into a position approaching comfort. If Glokta had been given the opportunity to shake the hand of any one man, any one at all, he would surely have chosen the inventor of chairs. *He has made my life almost bearable.*

Frost stepped silently out of the corner and took hold of the loose top of the bag between meaty, pale finger and heavy, white thumb. Glokta nodded and the Practical ripped it off, leaving Salem Rews blinking in the harsh light.

A mean, piggy, ugly little face. You mean, ugly pig. Rews. You disgusting swine. You're ready to confess right now, I'll bet, ready to talk and talk without interruption, until we're all sick of it. There was a big dark bruise across his cheek and another on his jaw above his double chin. As his watering eyes adjusted to the brightness he recognised Glokta sitting opposite him, and his face suddenly filled with hope. *A sadly, sadly misplaced hope.*

'Glokta, you have to help me!' he squealed, leaning forward as far as his bonds would allow, words bubbling out in a desperate, mumbling mess. 'I'm

falsely accused, you know it, I'm innocent! You've come to help me, yes? You're my friend! You have influence here. We're friends, friends! You could say something for me! I'm an innocent man, falsely accused! I'm—'

Glokta held up his hand for silence. He stared at Rews' familiar face for a moment, as though he had never laid eyes on him before. Then he turned to Frost. 'Am I supposed to know this man?'

The albino said nothing. The bottom part of his face was hidden by his Practical's mask, and the top half gave nothing away. He stared unblinking at the prisoner in the chair, pink eyes as dead as a corpse. He hadn't blinked once since Glokta came into the room. *How can he do that?*

'It's me, Rews!' hissed the fat man, the pitch of his voice rising steadily towards panic. 'Salem Rews, you know me, Glokta! I was with you in the war, before . . . you know . . . we're friends! We—'

Glokta held up his hand again and sat back, tapping one of his few remaining teeth with a fingernail as though deep in thought. 'Rews. The name is familiar. A merchant, a member of the Guild of Mercers. A rich man by all accounts. I remember now ...' Glokta leaned forward, pausing for effect. 'He was a traitor! He was taken by the Inquisition, his property confiscated. You see, he had conspired to avoid the King's taxes.' Rews' mouth was hanging open. 'The King's taxes!' screamed Glokta, smashing his hand down on the table. The fat man stared, wide eyed, and licked at a tooth. *Upper right side, second from the back.*

'But where are our manners?' asked Glokta of no one in particular. 'We may or may not have known each other once, but I don't think you and my assistant have been properly introduced. Practical Frost, say hello to this fat man.'

It was an open-handed blow, but powerful enough to knock Rews clean out of his seat. The chair rattled but was otherwise unaffected. *How is that done? To knock him to the ground but leave the chair standing?* Rews sprawled gurgling across the floor, face flattened on the tiles.

'He reminds me of a beached whale,' said Glokta absently. The albino grabbed Rews under the arm and hauled him up, flung him back into the chair. Blood seeped from a cut on his cheek, but his piggy eyes were hard now. *Blows make most men soften up, but some men harden. I never would have taken this one for a tough man, but life is full of surprises.*

Rews spat blood onto the table top. 'You've gone too far here, Glokta, oh yes! The Mercers are an honourable guild; we have influence! They won't put up with this! I'm a known man! Even now my wife will be petitioning the King to hear my case!'

'Ah, your wife.' Glokta smiled sadly. 'Your wife is a very beautiful woman. Beautiful, and young. I fear, perhaps, a little too young for you. I fear she took the opportunity to be rid of you. I fear she came forward with your books. All the books.' Rews' face paled.

'We looked at those books,' Glokta indicated an imaginary pile of papers on his left, 'we looked at the books in the treasury,' indicating another on his right. 'Imagine our surprise when we could not make the numbers add up. And then there were the night-time visits by your employees to warehouses in the old quarter, the small unregistered boats, the payments to officials, the

forged documentation. Must I go on?' asked Glokta, shaking his head in profound disapproval. The fat man swallowed and licked his lips.

Pen and ink were placed before the prisoner, and the paper of confession, filled out in detail in Frost's beautiful, careful script, awaiting only the signature. *I'll get him right here and now.*

'Confess, Rews,' Glokta whispered softly, 'and put a painless end to this regrettable business. Confess and name your accomplices. We already know who they are. It will be easier on all of us. I don't want to hurt you, believe me, it will give me no pleasure.' *Nothing will.* 'Confess. Confess, and you will be spared. Exile in Angland is not so bad as they would have you believe. There is still pleasure to be had from life there, and the satisfaction of a day of honest work, in the service of your King. Confess!' Rews stared at the floor, licking at his tooth. Glokta sat back and sighed.

'Or not,' he said, 'and I can come back with my instruments.' Frost moved forward, his massive shadow falling across the fat man's face. 'Body found floating by the docks,' Glokta breathed, 'bloated by seawater and horribly mutilated . . . far . . . far beyond recognition.' *He's ready to talk. He's fat and ripe and ready to burst.* 'Were the injuries inflicted before or after death?' he asked the ceiling breezily. 'Was the mysterious deceased a man or a woman even?' Glokta shrugged. 'Who can say?'

There was a sharp knock at the door. Rews' face jerked up, filled with hope again. *Not now, damn it!* Frost went to the door, opened it a crack. Something was said. The door shut, Frost leaned down to whisper in Glokta's ear.

'Ith Theverar,' came the half-tongued mumble, by which Glokta understood that Severard was at the door.

Already? Glokta smiled and nodded, as if it was good news. Rews' face fell a little. *How could a man whose business has been concealment find it impossible to hide his emotions in this room?* But Glokta knew how. *It's hard to stay calm when you're terrified, helpless, alone, at the mercy of men with no mercy at all. Who could know that better than me?* He sighed, and using his most world-weary tone of voice asked, 'Do you wish to confess?'

'No!' The defiance had returned to the prisoner's piggy eyes now. He stared back, silent and watchful, and sucked. *Surprising. Very surprising. But then we're just getting started.*

'Is that tooth bothering you, Rews?' There was nothing Glokta didn't know about teeth. His own mouth had been worked on by the very best. *Or the very worst, depending on how you look at it.* 'It seems that I must leave you now, but while I'm away, I'll be thinking about that tooth. I'll be considering very carefully what to do with it.' He took hold of his cane. 'I want you to think about me, thinking about your tooth. And I also want you to think, very carefully, about signing your confession.'

Glokta got awkwardly to his feet, shaking out his aching leg. 'I think you may respond well to a straightforward beating however, so I'm going to leave you in the company of Practical Frost for half an hour.' Rews' mouth became a silent circle of surprise. The albino picked up the chair, fat man and all, and turned it slowly around. 'He's absolutely the best there is at this kind of thing.' Frost took out a pair of battered leather gloves and began to pull them carefully onto his big white hands, one finger at a time. 'You always did like

to have the very best of everything, eh, Rews?’ Glokta made for the door.

‘Wait! Glokta!’ wailed Rews over his shoulder. ‘Wait I—’

Practical Frost clamped a gloved hand over the fat man’s mouth and held a finger to his mask. ‘Thhhhhhh,’ he said. The door clicked shut.

Severard was leaning against the wall in the corridor, one foot propped on the plaster behind him, whistling tunelessly beneath his mask and running a hand through his long, lanky hair. As Glokta came through the door he straightened up and gave a little bow, and it was plain by his eyes that he was smiling. *He’s always smiling.*

‘Superior Kalyne wants to see you,’ he said in his broad, common accent, ‘and I’m of the opinion that I never saw him angrier.’

‘Severard, you poor thing, you must be terrified. Do you have the box?’

‘I do.’

‘And you took something out for Frost?’

‘I did.’

‘And something for your wife too, I hope?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Severard, his eyes smiling more than ever, ‘My wife will be well taken care of. If I ever get one.’

‘Good. I hasten to answer the call of the Superior. When I have been with him for five minutes, come in with the box.’

‘Just barge into his office?’

‘Barge in and stab him in the face for all I care.’

‘I’d consider that done, Inquisitor.’

Glokta nodded, turned away, then turned back. ‘Don’t really stab him, eh, Severard?’

The Practical smiled with his eyes and sheathed his vicious-looking knife. Glokta rolled his eyes up to the ceiling, then limped off, his cane tapping on the tiles, his leg throbbing. Click, tap, pain. That was the rhythm of his walking.

The Superior’s office was a large and richly appointed room high up in the House of Questions, a room in which everything was too big and too fancy. A huge, intricate window dominated one wood-panelled wall, offering a view over the well-tended gardens in the courtyard below. An equally huge and ornate desk stood in the centre of a richly coloured carpet from somewhere warm and exotic. The head of a fierce animal from somewhere cold and exotic was mounted above a magnificent stone fireplace with a tiny, mean fire close to burning out inside.

Superior Kalyne himself made his office look small and drab. A vast, florid man in his late fifties, he had over-compensated for his thinning hair with magnificent white side whiskers. He was considered a daunting presence even within the Inquisition, but Glokta was past scaring, and they both knew it.

There was a big, fancy chair behind the desk, but the Superior was pacing up and down while he screamed, his arms waving. Glokta was seated on something which, while doubtless expensive, had clearly been designed to make its occupant as uncomfortable as possible. *It doesn’t bother me much, though. Uncomfortable is as good as I ever get.*

He amused himself with the thought of Kalyne’s head mounted above the fireplace instead of that fierce animal’s, while the Superior ranted at him. *He’s*

every bit like his fireplace, the big dolt. Looks impressive, but there's not much going on underneath. I wonder how he'd respond to an interrogation? I'd start with those ridiculous side whiskers. But Glokta's face was a mask of attention and respect.

'Well you've outdone yourself this time, Glokta, you mad cripple! When the Mercers find out about this they'll have you flayed!'

'I've tried flaying, it tickles.' *Damn it, keep your mouth shut and smile. Where's that whistling fool Severard? I'll have him flayed when I get out of here.*

'Oh yes, that's good, that's very good, Glokta, look at me laugh! And evasion of the King's taxes?' The Superior glowered down, whiskers bristling. 'The King's taxes?' he screamed, spraying Glokta with spit. 'They're all at it! The Mercers, the Spicers, all of them! Every damn fool with a boat!'

'But this was so open, Superior. It was an insult to us. I felt we had to—'

'You felt?' Kalyne was red-faced and vibrating with rage. 'You were explicitly told to keep away from the Mercers, away from the Spicers, away from all the big guilds!' He strode up and down with ever greater speed. *You'll wear your carpet out at this rate. The big guilds will have to buy you a new one.*

'You felt, did you? Well he'll have to go back! We'll have to release him and you'll have to feel your way to a grovelling apology! It's a damn disgrace! You've made me look ridiculous! Where is he now?'

'I left him in the company of Practical Frost.'

'With that mumbling animal?' The Superior tore at his hair in desperation. 'Well that's it then, isn't it? He'll be a ruin now! We can't send him back in that condition! You're finished here, Glokta! Finished! I'm going straight to the Arch Lector! Straight to the Arch Lector!'

The huge door was kicked open and Severard sauntered in carrying a wooden box. *And not a moment too soon.* The Superior stared, speechless, open-mouthed with wrath, as Severard dropped it on the desk with a thump and a jingle.

'What the hell is the meaning of . . .' Severard pulled open the lid, and Kalyne saw the money. *All that lovely money.* He stopped in mid-rant, mouth stuck forming the next sound. He looked surprised, then he looked puzzled, then he looked cautious. He pursed his lips and slowly sat down.

'Thank you, Practical Severard,' said Glokta. 'You may go.' The Superior was stroking thoughtfully at his side whiskers as Severard strolled out, his face returning gradually to its usual shade of pink. 'Confiscated from Rew's. The property of the Crown now, of course. I thought that I should give it to you, as my direct superior, so that you could pass it on to the Treasury.' *Or buy a bigger desk, you leech.*

Glokta leaned forward, hands on his knees. 'You could say, perhaps, that Rew's went too far, that questions had been asked, that an example had to be made. We can't be seen to do nothing, after all. It'll make the big guilds nervous, keep them in line.' *It'll make them nervous and you can screw more out of them.* 'Or you could always tell them that I'm a mad cripple, and blame me for it.'

The Superior was starting to like it now, Glokta could tell. He was trying not to show it, but his whiskers were quivering at the sight of all that money. 'Alright, Glokta. Alright. Very well.' He reached out and carefully shut the lid of the box. 'But if you ever think of doing something like this again . . . talk to

me first, would you? I don't like surprises.'

Glokta struggled to his feet, limped towards the door. 'Oh, and one more thing!' He turned stiffly back. Kalyne was staring at him severely from beneath his big, fancy brows. 'When I go to see the Mercers, I'll need to take Rews' confession.'

Glokta smiled broadly, showing the yawning gap in his front teeth. 'That shouldn't be a problem, Superior.'

Kalyne had been right. There was no way that Rews could have gone back in this condition. His lips were split and bloody, his sides covered in darkening bruises, his head lolled sideways, face swollen almost past recognition. *In short, he looks like a man ready to confess.*

'I don't imagine you enjoyed the last half hour, Rews, I don't imagine you enjoyed it much at all. Perhaps it was the worst half hour of your life, I really couldn't say. I'm thinking about what we have for you here, though, and the sad fact is . . . that's about as good as it gets. That's the high life.' Glokta leaned forward, his face just inches from the bloody pulp of Rews' nose. 'Practical Frost's a little girl compared to me,' he whispered. 'He's a kitten. Once I get started with you, Rews, you'll be looking back on this with nostalgia. You'll be begging me to give you half an hour with the Practical. Do you understand?' Rews was silent, except for the air whistling through his broken nose.

'Show him the instruments,' whispered Glokta.

Frost stepped forward and opened the polished case with a theatrical flourish. It was a masterful piece of craftsmanship. As the lid was pulled back, the many trays inside lifted and fanned out, displaying Glokta's tools in all their gruesome glory. There were blades of every size and shape, needles curved and straight, bottles of oil and acid, nails and screws, clamps and pliers, saws, hammers, chisels. Metal, wood and glass glittered in the bright lamplight, all polished to mirror brightness and honed to a murderous sharpness. A big purple swelling under Rews' left eye had closed it completely, but the other darted over the instruments: terrified, fascinated. The functions of some were horribly obvious, the functions of others were horribly obscure. *Which scare him more, I wonder?*

'We were talking about your tooth, I think,' murmured Glokta. Rews' eye flicked up to look at him. 'Or would you like to confess?' *I have him, here he comes. Confess, confess, confess, confess . . .*

There was a sharp knock at the door. *Damn it again!* Frost opened it a crack and there was a brief whispering. Rews licked at his bloated lip. The door shut, the albino leaned to whisper in Glokta's ear.

'Ith the Arth Ector.' Glokta froze. *The money was not enough. While I was shuffling back from Kalyne's office, the old bastard was reporting me to the Arch Lector. Am I finished then?* He felt a guilty thrill at the thought. *Well, I'll see to this fat pig first.*

'Tell Severard I'm on my way.' Glokta turned back to talk to his prisoner, but Frost put a big white hand on his shoulder.

'O. The Arth Ector,' Frost pointed to the door, 'he'th ere. Ow.'

Here? Glokta could feel his eyelid twitching. *Why?* He pushed himself up using the edge of the table. *Will they find me in the canal tomorrow? Dead and*

bloated, far . . . far beyond recognition? The only emotion that he felt at the idea was a flutter of mild relief. *No more stairs.*

The Arch Lector of His Majesty's Inquisition was standing outside in the corridor. The grimy walls looked almost brown behind him, so brilliantly spotless were his long white coat, his white gloves, his shock of white hair. He was past sixty, but showed none of the infirmity of age. Every tall, clean-shaven, fine-boned inch of him was immaculately turned out. *He looks like a man who has never once in his life been surprised by anything.*

They had met once before, six years earlier when Glokta joined the Inquisition, and he hardly seemed to have changed. Arch Lector Sult. One of the most powerful men in the Union. *One of the most powerful men in the world, come to that.* Behind him, almost like outsized shadows, loomed two enormous, silent, black-masked Practicals.

The Arch Lector gave a thin smile when he saw Glokta shuffle out of his door. It said a lot, that smile. *Mild scorn, mild pity, the very slightest touch of menace. Anything but amusement.* 'Inquisitor Glokta,' he said, holding out one white-gloved hand, palm down. A ring with a huge purple stone flashed on his finger.

'I serve and obey, your Eminence.' Glokta could not help grimacing as he bent slowly forward to touch his lips to the ring. A difficult and painful manoeuvre, it seemed to take forever. When he finally hoisted himself back upright, Sult was gazing at him calmly with his cool blue eyes. A look that implied he already understood Glokta completely, and was unimpressed.

'Come with me.' The Arch Lector turned and swept away down the corridor. Glokta limped along after him, the silent Practicals marching close behind. Sult moved with an effortless, languid confidence, coat tails flapping gracefully out behind him. *Bastard.* Soon they reached a door, much like his own. The Arch Lector unlocked it and went inside, the Practicals took up positions either side of the doorway, arms folded. *A private interview then. One which I, perhaps, will never leave.* Glokta stepped over the threshold.

A box of grubby white plaster too brightly lit and with a ceiling too low for comfort. It had a big crack instead of a damp patch, but was otherwise identical to his own room. It had the scarred table, the cheap chairs, it even had a poorly cleaned bloodstain. *I wonder if they're painted on, for the effect?* One of the Practicals suddenly pulled the door shut with a loud bang. Glokta was intended to jump, but he couldn't be bothered.

Arch Lector Sult lowered himself gracefully into one of the seats, drew a heavy sheaf of yellowing papers across the table towards him. He waved his hand at the other chair, the one that would be used by the prisoner. The implications were not lost on Glokta.

'I prefer to stand, your Eminence.'

Sult smiled at him. He had lovely, pointy teeth, all shiny white. 'No, you don't.'

He has me there. Glokta lowered himself ungracefully into the prisoner's chair while the Arch Lector turned over the first page of his wedge of documents, frowned and shook his head gently as though horribly disappointed by what he saw. *The details of my illustrious career, perhaps?*

'I had a visit from Superior Kalyne not long ago. He was most upset.' Sult's

hard blue eyes came up from his papers. 'Upset with you, Glokta. He was quite vocal on the subject. He told me that you are an uncontrollable menace, that you act without a thought for the consequences, that you are a mad cripple. He demanded that you be removed from his department.' The Arch Lector smiled, a cold, nasty smile, the kind Glokta used on his prisoners. *But with more teeth.* 'I think he had it in mind that you be removed . . . altogether.' They stared at each other across the table.

Is this where I beg for mercy? Is this where I crawl on the ground and kiss your feet? Well, I don't care enough to beg and I'm far too stiff to crawl. Your Practicals will have to kill me sitting down. Cut my throat. Bash my head in. Whatever. As long as they get on with it.

But Sult was in no rush. The white-gloved hands moved neatly, precisely, the pages hissed and crackled. 'We have few men like you in the Inquisition, Glokta. A nobleman, from an excellent family. A champion swordsman, a dashing cavalry officer. A man once groomed for the very top.' Sult looked him up and down as though he could hardly believe it.

'That was before the war, Arch Lector.'

'Obviously. There was much dismay at your capture, and little hope that you would be returned alive. As the war dragged on and the months passed, hope diminished to nothing, but when the treaty was signed, you were among those prisoners returned to the Union.' He peered at Glokta through narrowed eyes. 'Did you talk?'

Glokta couldn't help himself, he spluttered with shrill laughter. It echoed strangely in the cold room. Not a sound you often heard down here. 'Did I talk? I talked until my throat was raw. I told them everything I could think of. I screamed every secret I'd ever heard. I babbled like a fool. When I ran out of things to tell them I made things up. I pissed myself and cried like a girl. Everyone does.'

'But not everyone survives. Two years in the Emperor's prisons. No one else lasted half that long. The physicians were sure you would never leave your bed again, but a year later you made your application to the Inquisition.' *We both know it. We were both there. What do you want from me, and why not get on with it? I suppose some men just love the sound of their own voices.*

'I was told that you were crippled, that you were broken, that you could never be mended, that you could never be trusted. But I was inclined to give you a chance. Some fool wins the Contest every year, and wars produce many promising soldiers, but your achievement in surviving those two years was unique. So you were sent to the North, and put in charge of one of our mines there. What did you make of Angland?'

A filthy sink of violence and corruption. A prison where we have made slaves of the innocent and guilty alike in the name of freedom. A stinking hole where we send those we hate and those we are ashamed of to die of hunger, and disease, and hard labour. 'It was cold,' said Glokta.

'And so were you. You made few friends in Angland. Precious few among the Inquisition, and none among the exiles.' He plucked a tattered letter from among the papers and cast a critical eye over it. 'Superior Goyle told me that you were a cold fish, had no blood in you at all. He thought you'd never amount to anything, that he could make no use of you.' *Goyle. That bastard.*

That butcher. I'd rather have no blood than no brains.

'But after three years, production was up. It was doubled in fact. So you were brought back to Adua, to work under Superior Kalyne. I thought perhaps you would learn discipline with him, but it seems I was wrong. You insist on going your own way.' The Arch Lector frowned up at him. 'To be frank, I think that Kalyne is afraid of you. I think they all are. They don't like your arrogance, they don't like your methods, they don't like your . . . special insight into our work.'

'And what do you think, Arch Lector?'

'Honestly? I'm not sure I like your methods much either, and I doubt that your arrogance is entirely deserved. But I like your results. I like your results very much.' He slapped the bundle of papers closed and rested one hand on top of it, leaning across the table towards Glokta. *As I might lean towards my prisoners when I ask them to confess.* 'I have a task for you. A task that should make better use of your talents than chasing around after petty smugglers. A task that may allow you to redeem yourself in the eyes of the Inquisition.' The Arch Lector paused for a long moment. 'I want you to arrest Sepp dan Teufel.'

Glokta frowned. *Teufel?* 'The Master of the Mints, your Eminence?'

'The very same.'

The Master of the Royal Mints. An important man from an important family. A very big fish, to be hooked in my little tank. A fish with powerful friends. It could be dangerous, arresting a man like that. It could be fatal. 'May I ask why?'

'You may not. Let me worry about the whys. You concentrate on obtaining a confession.'

'A confession to what, Arch Lector?'

'Why, to corruption and high treason! It seems our friend the Master of the Mints has been most indiscreet in some of his personal dealings. It seems he has been taking bribes, conspiring with the Guild of Mercers to defraud the King. As such, it would be very useful if a ranking Mercer were to name him, in some unfortunate connection.'

It can hardly be a coincidence that I have a ranking Mercer in my interrogation room, even as we speak. Glokta shrugged. 'Once people start talking, it's shocking the names that tumble out.'

'Good.' The Arch Lector waved his hand. 'You may go, Inquisitor. I will come for Teufel's confession this time tomorrow. You had better have it.'

Glokta breathed slowly as he laboured back along the corridor.

Breath in, breath out. Calm. He had not expected to leave that room alive. *And now I find myself moving in powerful circles. A personal task for the Arch Lector, squeezing a confession to high treason from one of the Union's most trusted officials. The most powerful of circles, but for how long? Why me? Because of my results?*

Or because I won't be missed?

'I apologise for all the interruptions today, really I do, it's like a brothel in here with all the coming and going.' Rew's twisted his cracked and swollen lips into a sad smile. *Smiling at a time like this, he's a marvel. But all things must end.* 'Let us be honest, Rew. No one is coming to help you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever. You will confess. The only choices you have are when,

and the state you'll be in when you do. There's really nothing to be gained by putting it off. Except pain. We've got lots of that for you.'

It was hard to read the expression on Rews' bloody face, but his shoulders sagged. He dipped the pen in the ink with a trembling hand, wrote his name, slightly slanted, across the bottom of the paper of confession. *I win again. Does my leg hurt any less? Do I have my teeth back? Has it helped me to destroy this man, who I once called a friend? Then why do I do this?* The scratching of the nib on the paper was the only reply.

'Excellent,' said Glokta. Practical Frost turned the document over. 'And this is the list of your accomplices?' He let his eye scan lazily over the names. *A handful of junior Mercers, three ship's captains, an officer of the city watch, a pair of minor customs officials. A tedious recipe indeed. Let us see if we can add some spice.* Glokta turned it around and pushed it back across the table. 'Add Sepp dan Teufel's name to the list, Rews.'

The fat man looked confused. 'The Master of the Mints?' he mumbled, through his thick lips.

'That's the one.'

'But I never met the man.'

'So?' snapped Glokta. 'Do as I tell you.' Rews paused, mouth a little open. 'Write, you fat pig.' Practical Frost cracked his knuckles.

Rews licked his lips. 'Sepp . . . dan . . . Teufel,' he mumbled to himself as he wrote.

'Excellent.' Glokta carefully shut the lid on his horrible, beautiful instruments. 'I'm glad for both our sakes that we won't be needing these today.'

Frost snapped the manacles shut on the prisoner's wrists and dragged him to his feet, started to march him toward the door at the back of the room. 'What now?' shouted Rews over his shoulder.

'Angland, Rews, Angland. Don't forget to pack something warm.' The door cracked shut behind him. Glokta looked at the list of names in his hands. Sepp dan Teufel's sat at the bottom. *One name. On the face of it, just like the others. Teufel. Just one more name. But such a perilous one.*

Severard was waiting outside in the corridor, smiling as always. 'Shall I put the fat man in the canal?'

'No, Severard. Put him in the next boat to Angland.'

'You're in a merciful mood today, Inquisitor.'

Glokta snorted. 'Mercy would be the canal. That swine won't last six weeks in the North. Forget him. We have to arrest Sepp dan Teufel tonight.'

Severard's eyebrows rose. 'Not the Master of the Mints?'

'None other. On the express orders of his Eminence the Arch Lector. It seems he's been taking money from the Mercers.'

'Oh, for shame.'

'We'll leave as soon as it gets dark. Tell Frost to be ready.'

The thin Practical nodded, his long hair swaying. Glokta turned and hobbled up the corridor, cane tapping on the grimy tiles, left leg burning.

Why do I do this? He asked himself again.

Why do I do this?

No Choice at All

Logen woke with a painful jolt. He was lying awkwardly, head twisted against something hard, knees drawn up towards his chest. He opened his eyes a bleary crack. It was dark, but there was a faint glow coming from somewhere. Light through snow.

Panic stabbed at him. He knew where he was now. He'd piled some snow in the entrance to the tiny cave, to try and keep in the warmth, such as it was. It must have snowed while he was sleeping, and sealed him in. If the fall had been a heavy one there could be a lot of snow out there. Drifts deeper than a man was tall. He might never get out. He could have climbed all the way up out of the high valleys just to die in a hole in the rock, too cramped for him to even stretch out his legs.

Logen twisted round in the narrow space as best he could, dug away at the snow with his numb hands, floundering at it, grappling with it, hacking through it, mouthing breathless curses to himself. Light spilled in suddenly, searing bright. He shoved the last of the snow out of the way and dragged himself through into the open air.

The sky was a brilliant blue, the sun was blazing overhead. He turned his face towards it, closed his stinging eyes and let the light wash over him. The air was painful cold in his throat. Cutting cold. His mouth was dry as dust, his tongue a piece of wood, badly carved. He scooped up snow and shoved it into his mouth. It melted, he swallowed. Cold, it made his head hurt.

There was a graveyard stink coming from somewhere. Not just his own damp and sour sweat smell, though that was bad enough. It was the blanket, starting to rot. He had two pieces of it wrapped round his hands like mittens, tied round his wrists with twine, another round his head, like a dirty, foul-smelling hood. His boots were stuffed tight with it. The rest was wrapped round and round his body, under his coat. It smelled bad, but it had saved his life last night, and that was a good trade to Logen's mind. It would stink a good deal more before he could afford to get rid of it.

He floundered to his feet and stared about. A narrow valley, steep sided and choked with snow. Three great peaks surrounded it, piles of dark grey stone and white snow against the blue sky. He knew them. Old friends, in fact. The only ones he had left. He was up in the High Places. The roof of the world. He was safe.

'Safe,' he croaked to himself, but without much joy. Safe from food, certainly. Safe from warmth, without a doubt. Neither of those things would be troubling him up here. He'd escaped the Shanka, maybe, but this was a place for the dead, and if he stayed he'd be joining them.

He was brutal hungry as it was. His belly was a great, painful hole that called to him with piercing cries. He fumbled in his pack for the last strip of meat. An old, brown, greasy thing like a dry twig. That would hardly fill the

gap, but it was all he had. He tore at it with his teeth, tough as old boot leather, and choked it down with some snow.

Logen shielded his eyes with his arm and looked northward down the valley, the way he'd come the day before. The ground dropped slowly away, snow and rock giving way to the pine-covered fells of the high valleys, trees giving way to a crinkled strip of grazing land, grassy hills giving way to the sea, a sparkling line on the far horizon. Home. The thought of it made Logen feel sick.

Home. That was where his family was. His father – wise and strong, a good man, a good leader to his people. His wife, his children. They were a good family. They deserved a better son, a better husband, a better father. His friends were there too. Old and new together. It would be good to see them all again, very good. To speak to his father in the long hall. To play with his children, to sit with his wife by the river. To talk of tactics with Threetrees. To hunt with the Dogman in the high valleys, crashing through the forest with a spear, laughing like a fool.

Logen felt a sudden painful longing. He nearly choked on the pain of it. Trouble was, they were all dead. The hall was a ring of black splinters, the river a sewer. He'd never forget coming over the hill, seeing the burnt-out ruin in the valley below. Crawling through the ashes, fumbling for signs that someone got away, while the Dogman pulled at his shoulder and told him to give it up. Nothing but corpses, rotted past knowing. He was done looking for signs. They were all dead as the Shanka could make them, and that was dead for sure. He spat in the snow, brown spit from the dry meat. Dead and cold and rotted, or burned to ashes. Gone back to the mud.

Logen set his jaw and clenched his fists under the rotten shreds of blanket. He could go back to the ruins of the village by the sea, just one last time. He could charge down with a fighting roar in his throat, the way he had done at Carleon, when he'd lost a finger and won a reputation. He could put a few Shanka out of the world. Split them like he'd split Shama Heartless, shoulder to guts so his insides fell out. He could get vengeance for his father, his wife, his children, his friends. That would be a fitting end for the one they called the Bloody-Nine. To die killing. That might be a song worth the singing.

But at Carleon he'd been young and strong, and with his friends behind him. Now he was weak, and hungry, and alone as could be. He'd killed Shama Heartless with a long sword, sharp as anything. He looked down at his knife. It might be a good one, but he'd get precious little vengeance with it. And who'd sing the song anyway? The Shanka had poor singing voices and worse imaginations, if they even recognised the stinking beggar in the blanket after they'd shot him full of arrows. Perhaps the vengeance could wait, at least until he had a bigger blade to work with. You have to be realistic, after all.

South then, and become a wanderer. There was always work for a man with his skills. Hard work perhaps, and dark, but work all the same. There was an appeal in it, he had to admit. To have no one depending on him but himself, for his decisions to hold no importance, for no one's life or death to be in his hands. He had enemies in the south, that was a fact. But the Bloody-Nine had dealt with enemies before.

He spat again. Now that he had some spit he thought he might make the

most of it. It was about all he did have – spit, an old pot, and some stinking bits of blanket. Dead in the north or alive in the south. That was what it came down to, and that was no choice at all.

You carry on. That's what he'd always done. That's the task that comes with surviving, whether you deserve to live or not. You remember the dead as best you can. You say some words for them. Then you carry on, and you hope for better.

Logen took in a long, cold breath, and blew it out. 'Fare you well, my friends,' he muttered. 'Fare you well.' Then he threw his pack over his shoulder, turned, and began to flounder through the deep snow. Downwards, southwards, out of the mountains.

It was raining, still. A soft rain that coated everything in cold dew, collected on the branches, on the leaves, on the needles, and dripped off in great fat drops that soaked through Logen's wet clothes and onto his wet skin.

He squatted, still and silent, in the damp brush, water running down his face, the bright blade of his knife glistening with wet. He felt the great motion of the forest and heard all its thousand sounds. The countless crawling of the insects, the blind scuttling of the moles, the timid rustling of the deer, the slow pulsing of the sap in the old tree trunks. Each thing alive in the forest was in search of its own kind of food, and he was the same. He let his mind settle on an animal close to him, moving cautiously through the woods to his right. Delicious. The forest grew silent but for the endless dripping of water from the branches. The world shrank down to Logen and his next meal.

When he reckoned it was close enough, he sprang forward and bore it down onto the wet ground. A young deer. It kicked and struggled but he was strong and quick, and he stabbed his knife into its neck and chopped the throat out. Hot blood surged from the wound, spilled out across Logen's hands, onto the wet earth.

He picked up the carcass and slung it over his shoulders. That would be good in a stew, maybe with some mushrooms. Very good. Then, once he'd eaten, he would ask the spirits for guidance. Their guidance was pretty useless, but the company would be welcome.

When he reached his camp it was close to sunset. It was a dwelling fit for a hero of Logen's stature – two big sticks holding a load of damp branches over a hollow in the dirt. Still, it was halfway dry in there, and the rain had stopped. He would have a fire tonight. It was a long time since he'd had a treat like that. A fire, and all his own.

Later, well fed and rested, Logen pressed a lump of chagga into his pipe. He'd found it growing a few days before at the base of a tree, big moist yellow discs of it. He'd broken off a good chunk for himself, but it hadn't dried out enough to smoke until today. Now he took a burning twig from the fire and stuck it in the bowl, puffing away hard until the fungus caught and began to burn, giving off its familiar earthy-sweet smell.

Logen coughed, blew out brown smoke and stared into the shifting flames. His mind went back to other times and other campfires. The Dogman was there, grinning, the light gleaming on his pointy teeth. Tul Duru was sitting opposite, big as a mountain, laughing like thunder. Forley the Weakest too, with those nervous eyes darting around, always a little scared. Rudd

Threetrees was there, and Harding Grim, saying nothing. He never did say anything. That was why they called him Grim.

They were all there. Only they weren't. They were all dead, gone back to the mud. Logen tapped the pipe out into the fire and shoved it away. He had no taste for it now. His father had been right. You should never smoke alone.

He unscrewed the cap of the battered flask, took a mouthful, and blew it out in a spray of tiny drops. A gout of flame went up into the cold air. Logen wiped his lips, savouring the hot, bitter taste. Then he sat back against the knotted trunk of a pine, and waited.

It was a while before they came. Three of them. They came silently from the dancing shadows among the trees and made slowly for the fire, taking shape as they moved into the light.

'Ninefingers,' said the first.

'Ninefingers,' the second.

'Ninefingers,' the third, voices like the thousand sounds of the forest.

'You're right welcome to my fire,' said Logen. The spirits squatted and stared at him without expression. 'Only three tonight?'

The one on the right spoke first. 'Every year fewer of us wake from the winter. We are all that remain. A few more winters will pass, and we will sleep also. There will be none of us left to answer your call.'

Logen nodded sadly. 'Any news from the world?'

'We heard a man fell off a cliff but washed up alive, then crossed the High Places at the start of spring, wrapped in a rotten blanket, but we put no faith in such rumours.'

'Very wise.'

'Bethod has been making war,' said the spirit in the centre.

Logen frowned. 'Bethod is always making war. That's what he does.'

'Yes. He has won so many fights now, with your help, he has given himself a golden hat.'

'Shit on that bastard,' said Logen, spitting into the fire. 'What else?'

'North of the mountains, the Shanka run around and burn things.'

'They love the fire,' said the spirit in the centre.

'They do,' said the one on the left, 'even more than your kind, Ninefingers. They love and fear it.' The spirit leaned forwards. 'We heard there is a man seeking for you in the moors to the south.'

'A powerful man,' said the one in the centre.

'A Magus of the Old Time,' the one on the left.

Logen frowned. He'd heard of these Magi. He met a sorcerer once, but he'd been easy to kill. No unnatural powers in particular, not that Logen had noticed. But a Magus was something else.

'We heard that the Magi are wise and strong,' said the spirit in the centre, 'and that such a one could take a man far and show him many things. But they are crafty too, and have their own purposes.'

'What does he want?'

'Ask him.' Spirits cared little for the business of men, they were always weak on the details. Still, this was better than the usual talk about trees.

'What will you do, Ninefingers?'

Logen considered a moment. 'I will go south and find this Magus, and ask

him what he wants from me.'

The spirits nodded. They didn't show whether they thought it was a good idea or bad. They didn't care.

'Farewell then, Ninefingers,' said the spirit on the right, 'perhaps for the last time.'

'I'll try to struggle on without you.'

Logen's wit was wasted on them. They rose and moved away from the fire, fading gradually into the darkness. Soon they were gone, but Logen had to admit they had been more use than he dared to hope. They had given him a purpose.

He would head south in the morning, head south and find this Magus. Who knew? He might be a good talker. Had to be better than being shot full of arrows for nothing, at least. Logen looked into the flames, nodding slowly to himself.

He remembered other times and other campfires, when he had not been alone.

Playing With Knives

It was a beautiful spring day in Adua, and the sun shone pleasantly through the branches of the aromatic cedar, casting a dappled shade on the players beneath. A pleasing breeze fluttered through the courtyard, so the cards were clutched tightly or weighted down with glasses or coins. Birds twittered from the trees, and the shears of a gardener clacked across from the far side of the lawn, making faint, agreeable echoes against the tall white buildings of the quadrangle. Whether or not the players found the large sum of money in the centre of the table pleasant depended, of course, on the cards they held.

Captain Jezal dan Luthar certainly liked it. He had discovered an uncanny talent for the game since he gained his commission in the King's Own, a talent which he had used to win large sums of money from his comrades. He didn't really need the money, of course, coming from such a wealthy family, but it had allowed him to maintain an illusion of thrift while spending like a sailor. Whenever Jezal went home, his father bored everyone on the subject of his good fiscal planning, and had rewarded him by buying his Captaincy just six months ago. His brothers had not been happy. Yes, the money was certainly useful, and there's nothing half so amusing as humiliating one's closest friends.

Jezal half sat, half lay back on his bench with one leg stretched out, and allowed his eyes to wander over the other players. Major West had rocked his chair so far onto its back legs that he looked in imminent danger of tipping over entirely. He was holding his glass up to the sun, admiring the way that the light filtered through the amber spirit inside. He had a faint, mysterious smile which seemed to say, 'I am not a nobleman, and may be your social inferior, but I won a Contest and the King's favour on the battlefield and that makes me the better man, so you children will damn well do as I say.' He was out of this hand though, and, in Jezal's opinion, far too cautious with his money anyway.

Lieutenant Kasper was sitting forward, frowning and scratching his sandy beard, staring intently at his cards as though they were sums he didn't understand. He was a good-humoured young man but an oaf of a card player, and was always most appreciative when Jezal bought him drinks with his own money. Still, he could well afford to lose it: his father was one of the biggest landowners in the Union.

Jezal had often observed that the ever so slightly stupid will act more stupidly in clever company. Having lost the high ground already they scramble eagerly for the position of likeable idiot, stay out of arguments they will only lose, and can hence be everyone's friend. Kasper's look of baffled concentration seemed to say, 'I am not clever, but honest and likeable, which is much more important. Cleverness is overrated. Oh, and I'm very, very rich, so everyone likes me regardless.'

'I believe I'll stay with you,' said Kaspas, and tossed a small stack of silver coins onto the table. They broke and flashed in the sun with a cheerful jingle. Jezal absently added up the total in his head. A new uniform perhaps? Kaspas always got a little quivery when he really held good cards, and he was not trembling now. To say that he was bluffing was to give him far too much credit; more likely he was simply bored with sitting out. Jezal had no doubt that he would fold up like a cheap tent on the next round of betting.

Lieutenant Jalenhorm scowled and tossed his cards onto the table. 'I've had nothing but shit today!' he rumbled. He sat back in his chair and hunched his brawny shoulders with a frown that said, 'I am big and manly, and have a quick temper, so I should be treated with respect by everyone.' Respect was precisely what Jezal never gave him at the card table. A bad temper might be useful in a fight, but it's a liability where money is concerned. It was a shame his hand hadn't been a little better, or Jezal could've bullied him out of half his pay. Jalenhorm drained his glass and reached for the bottle.

That just left Brint, the youngest and poorest of the group. He licked his lips with an expression at once careful and slightly desperate, an expression which seemed to say, 'I am not young or poor. I can afford to lose this money. I am every bit as important as the rest of you.' He had a lot of money today; perhaps his allowance had just come in. Perhaps that was all he had to live on for the next couple of months. Jezal planned to take that money away from him and waste it all on women and drink. He had to stop himself giggling at the thought. He could giggle when he'd won the hand. Brint sat back and considered carefully. He might be some time making his decision, so Jezal took his pipe from the table.

He lit it at the lamp provided especially for that purpose and blew ragged smoke rings up into the branches of the cedar. He wasn't half as good at smoking as he was at cards, unfortunately, and most of the rings were no more than ugly puffs of yellow-brown vapour. If he was being completely honest, he didn't really enjoy smoking. It made him feel a bit sick, but it was very fashionable and very expensive, and Jezal would be damned if he would miss out on something fashionable just because he didn't like it. Besides, his father had bought him a beautiful ivory pipe the last time he was in the city, and it looked very well on him. His brothers had not been happy about that either, come to think of it.

'I'm in,' said Brint.

Jezal swung his leg off the bench. 'Then I raise you a hundred marks or so.' He shoved his whole stack into the centre of the table. West sucked air through his teeth. A coin fell from the top of the pile, landed on its edge and rolled along the wood. It dropped to the flags beneath with the unmistakable sound of falling money. The head of the gardener on the other side of the lawn snapped up instinctively, before he returned to his clipping of the grass.

Kaspas shoved his cards away as though they were burning his fingers and shook his head. 'Damn it but I'm an oaf of a card player,' he lamented, and leaned back against the rough brown trunk of the tree.

Jezal stared straight at Lieutenant Brint, a slight smile on his face, giving nothing away. 'He's bluffing,' rumbled Jalenhorm, 'don't let him push you around, Brint.'

'Don't do it, Lieutenant,' said West, but Jezal knew he would. He had to look as if he could afford to lose. Brint didn't hesitate, he pushed all his own coins in with a careless flourish.

'That's a hundred, give or take.' Brint was trying his hardest to sound masterful in front of the older officers, but his voice had a charming note of hysteria.

'Good enough,' said Jezal, 'we're all friends here. What do you have, Lieutenant?'

'I have earth.' Brint's eyes had a slightly feverish look to them as he showed his cards to the group.

Jezal savoured the tense atmosphere. He frowned, shrugged, raised his eyebrows. He scratched his head thoughtfully. He watched Brint's expression change as he changed his own. Hope, despair, hope, despair. At length Jezal spread his cards out on the table. 'Oh look. I have suns, again.'

Brint's face was a picture. West gave a sigh and shook his head. Jalenhorm frowned. 'I was sure he was bluffing,' he said.

'How does he do it?' asked Kaspas, flicking a stray coin across the table.

Jezal shrugged. 'It's all about the players, and nothing about the cards.' He began to scoop up the heap of silver while Brint looked on, teeth gritted, face pale. The money jingled into the bag with a pleasant sound. Pleasant to Jezal, anyway. A coin dropped from the table and fell next to Brint's boot. 'You couldn't fetch that for me could you Lieutenant?' asked Jezal, with a syrupy smile.

Brint stood up quickly, knocking into the table and making the coins and glasses jump and rattle. 'I've things to do,' he said in a thick voice, then shouldered roughly past Jezal, barging him against the trunk of the tree, and strode off toward the edge of the courtyard. He disappeared into the officers' quarters, head down.

'Did you see that?' Jezal was becoming ever more indignant with each passing moment. 'Barging me like that, it's damn impolite! And me his superior officer as well! I've a good mind to put him on report!' A chorus of disapproving sounds greeted this mention of reports. 'Well, he's a bad loser is all!'

Jalenhorm looked sternly out from beneath his brows. 'You shouldn't bite him so hard. He isn't rich. He can't afford to lose.'

'Well if he can't afford to lose he shouldn't play!' snapped Jezal, upset. 'Who's the one told him I was bluffing? You should keep your big mouth shut!' 'He's new here,' said West, 'he just wants to fit in. Weren't you new once?'

'What are you, my father?' Jezal remembered being new with painful clarity, and the mention of it made him feel just a little ashamed.

Kaspas waved his hand. 'I'll lend him some money, don't worry.'

'He won't take it,' said Jalenhorm.

'Well, that's his business.' Kaspas closed his eyes and turned his face up to the sun. 'Hot. Winter is truly over. Must be getting past midday.'

'Shit!' shouted Jezal, starting up and gathering his things. The gardener paused in his trimming of the lawn and looked over at them. 'Why didn't you say something, West?'

'What am I, your father?' asked the Major. Kaspas sniggered.

'Late again,' said Jalenhorm, blowing out his cheeks. 'The Lord Marshal will not be happy!'

Jezal snatched up his fencing steels and ran for the far side of the lawn. Major West ambled after him. 'Come on!' shouted Jezal.

'I'm right behind you, Captain,' he said. 'Right behind you.'

'Jab, jab, Jezal, jab, jab!' barked Lord Marshal Varuz, whacking him on the arm with his stick.

'Ow,' yelped Jezal, and hefted the metal bar again.

'I want to see that right arm moving, Captain, darting like a snake! I want to be blinded by the speed of those hands!'

Jezal made a couple more clumsy lunges with the unwieldy lump of iron. It was utter torture. His fingers, his wrist, his forearm, his shoulder, were burning with the effort. He was soaked to the skin with sweat; it flew from his face in big drops. Marshal Varuz flicked his feeble efforts away. 'Now, cut! Cut with the left!'

Jezal swung the big smith's hammer at the old man's head with all the strength in his left arm. He could barely lift the damn thing on a good day. Marshal Varuz stepped effortlessly aside and whacked him in the face with the stick.

'Yow!' wailed Jezal, as he stumbled back. He fumbled the hammer and it dropped on his foot. 'Aaargh!' The iron bar clanged to the floor as he bent down to grab his screaming toes. He felt a stinging pain as Varuz whacked him across the arse, the sharp smack echoing across the courtyard, and he sprawled onto his face.

'That's pitiful!' shouted the old man. 'You are embarrassing me in front of Major West!' The Major had rocked his chair back and was shaking with muffled laughter. Jezal stared at the Marshal's immaculately polished boots, seeing no pressing need to get up.

'Up, Captain Luthar!' shouted Varuz. 'My time at least is valuable!'

'Alright! Alright!' Jezal clambered wearily to his feet and stood there swaying in the hot sun, panting for air, running with sweat.

Varuz stepped close to him and sniffed at his breath. 'Have you been drinking today already?' he demanded, his grey moustaches bristling. 'And last night too, no doubt!' Jezal had no reply. 'Well damn you, then! We have work to do, Captain Luthar, and I cannot do it alone! Four months until the Contest, four months to make a master swordsman of you!'

Varuz waited for a reply, but Jezal could not think of one. He was only really doing this to make his father happy, but somehow he didn't think that was what the old soldier wanted to hear, and he could do without being hit again. 'Bah!' Varuz barked in Jezal's face, and turned away, stick clenched tight behind him in both hands.

'Marshal Var—' Jezal began, but before he could finish the old soldier span around and jabbed him right in the stomach.

'Gargh,' said Jezal as he sank to his knees. Varuz stood over him.

'You are going to go on a little run for me, Captain.'

'Aaargh.'

'You are going to run from here to the Tower of Chains. You are going to run up the tower to the parapet. We will know when you have arrived, as the

Major and I will be enjoying a relaxing game of squares on the roof,' he indicated the six-storey building behind him, 'in plain view of the top of the tower. I will be able to see you with my eye-glass, so there will be no cheating this time!' and he whacked Jezal on the top of the head.

'Ow,' said Jezal, rubbing his scalp.

'Having shown yourself on the roof, you will run back. You will run as fast as you can, and I know this to be true, because if you have not returned by the time we have finished our game, you will go again.' Jezal winced. 'Major West is an excellent hand at squares, so it should take me half an hour to beat him. I suggest you begin at once.'

Jezal lurched to his feet and jogged toward the archway at the far side of the courtyard, muttering curses.

'You'll need to go faster than that, Captain!' Varuz called after him. Jezal's legs were blocks of lead, but he urged them on.

'Knees up!' shouted Major West cheerily.

Jezal clattered down the passageway, past a smirking porter sitting by the door, and out onto the broad avenue beyond. He jogged past the ivy-covered walls of the University, cursing the names of Varuz and West under his heaving breath, then by the near windowless mass of the House of Questions, its heavy front gate sealed tight. He passed a few colourless clerks hurrying this way and that, but the Agriont was quiet at this time of the afternoon, and Jezal saw nobody of interest until he passed into the park.

Three fashionable young ladies were sitting in the shade of a spreading willow by the lake, accompanied by an elderly chaperone. Jezal upped his pace immediately, and replaced his tortured expression with a nonchalant smile.

'Ladies,' he said as he flashed past. He heard them giggling to one another behind him and silently congratulated himself, but slowed to half the speed as soon as he was out of sight.

'Varuz be damned,' he said to himself, nearly walking as he turned onto the Kingsway, but had to speed up again straight away. Crown Prince Ladisla was not twenty strides off, holding forth to his enormous, brightly coloured retinue.

'Captain Luthar!' shouted his Highness, sunlight flashing off his outrageous golden buttons, 'run for all you're worth! I have a thousand marks on you to win the Contest!'

Jezal had it on good authority that the Prince had backed Bremer dan Gorst to the tune of two thousand marks, but he still bowed as low as he possibly could while running. The prince's entourage of dandies cheered and shouted half-hearted encouragements at his receding back. 'Bloody idiots,' hissed Jezal under his breath, but he would have loved to be one of them.

He passed the huge stone effigies of six hundred years of High Kings on his right, the statues of their loyal retainers, slightly smaller, on his left. He nodded to the great Magus Bayaz just before he turned into the Square of Marshals, but the wizard frowned back as disapprovingly as ever, the awe-inspiring effect only slightly diminished by a streak of white pigeon shit on his stony cheek.

With the Open Council in session the square was almost empty, and Jezal

was able to amble over to the gate of the Halls Martial. A thick set sergeant nodded to him as he passed through, and Jezal wondered whether he might be from his own company – the common soldiers all looked the same, after all. He ignored the man and ran on between the towering white buildings.

‘Perfect,’ muttered Jezal. Jalenhorm and Kaspas were sitting by the door to the Tower of Chains, smoking pipes and laughing. The bastards must have guessed that he’d be coming this way.

‘For honour, and glory!’ bellowed Kaspas, rattling his sword in its scabbard as Jezal ran by. ‘Don’t keep the Lord Marshal waiting!’ he shouted from behind, and Jezal heard the big man roaring with amusement.

‘Bloody idiots,’ panted Jezal, shouldering open the heavy door, breath rasping as he started up the steep spiral staircase. It was one of the highest towers in the Agriont: there were two hundred and ninety-one steps in all. ‘Bloody steps,’ he cursed to himself. By the time he reached the hundredth his legs were burning and his chest was heaving. By the time he reached the two-hundredth he was a wreck. He walked the rest of the way, every footfall torture, and eventually burst out through a turret onto the roof and leaned on the parapet, blinking in the sudden brightness.

To the south the city was spread out below him, an endless carpet of white houses stretching all around the glittering bay. In the other direction, the view over the Agriont was even more impressive. A great confusion of magnificent buildings piled one upon the other, broken up by green lawns and great trees, circled by its wide moat and its towering wall, studded with a hundred lofty towers. The Kingsway sliced straight through the centre toward the Lords’ Round, its bronze dome shining in the sunlight. The tall spires of the University stood behind, and beyond them loomed the grim immensity of the House of the Maker, rearing high over all like a dark mountain, casting its long shadow across the buildings below.

Jezal fancied that he saw the sun glint on Marshal Varuz’ eye-glass in the distance. He cursed once again and made for the stairs.



Jezal was immensely relieved when he finally made it to the roof and saw that there were still a few white pieces on the board.

Marshal Varuz frowned up at him. ‘You are very lucky. The Major has put up an exceptionally determined defence.’ A smile broke West’s features. ‘You must somehow have earned his respect, even if you have yet to win mine.’

Jezal bent over with his hands on his knees, blowing hard and dripping sweat onto the floor. Varuz took the long case from the table, walked over to Jezal and flipped it open. ‘Show us your forms.’

Jezal took the short steel in his left hand and the long in his right. They felt light as feathers after the heavy iron. Marshal Varuz backed away a step. ‘Begin.’

He snapped into the first form, right arm extended, left close to the body. The blades swished and weaved through the air, glittering in the afternoon sun as Jezal moved from one familiar stance to the next with a practised

smoothness. At length he was finished, and he let the steels drop to his sides.

Varuz nodded. 'The Captain has fast hands, has he not?'

'Truly excellent,' said Major West, smiling broadly. 'A damn sight better than ever I was.'

The Lord Marshal was less impressed. 'Your knees are too far bent in the third form, and you must strive for more extension on the left arm in the fourth, but otherwise,' he paused, 'passable.' Jezal breathed a sigh of relief. That was high praise indeed.

'Hah!' shouted the old man, striking him in the ribs with the end of the case. Jezal sank to the floor, hardly able to breathe. 'Your reflexes need work, though, Captain. You should always be ready. Always. If you have steels in your hands, you damn well keep them up.'

'Yes, sir,' croaked Jezal.

'And your stamina is a disgrace, you are blowing like a carp. I have it on good authority that Bremer dan Gorst runs ten miles a day, and barely shows a sweat.' Marshal Varuz leaned down over him. 'From now on you will do the same. Oh yes. A circuit of the wall of the Agriont every morning at six, followed by an hour of sparring with Major West, who has been kind enough to agree to act as your partner. I am confident that he will point up all the little weaknesses in your technique.'

Jezal winced and rubbed his aching ribs. 'As for the carousing, I want an end to it. I am all for revelry in its proper place, but there will be time for celebration after the Contest, providing you have worked hard enough to win. Until then, clean living is what we need. Do you understand me, Captain Luthar?' He leaned down further, pronouncing every word with great care. 'Clean. Living. Captain.'

'Yes, Marshal Varuz,' mumbled Jezal.

Six hours later he was drunker than shit. Laughing like a lunatic he plunged out into the street, head spinning. The cold air slapped him hard in the face, the mean little buildings weaved and swayed, the ill-lit road tipped like a sinking ship. Jezal wrestled manfully with the urge to vomit, took a swaggering step out into the street, turned to face the door. Smeary bright light and loud sounds of laughter and shouting washed out at him. A ragged shape flew from the tavern and struck him in the chest. Jezal grappled with it desperately, then fell. He hit the ground with a bone-jarring crash.

The world was dark for a moment, then he found himself squashed into the dirt with Kasper on top of him. 'Damn it!' he gurgled, tongue thick and clumsy in his mouth. He shoved the giggling Lieutenant away with his elbow, rolled over and lurched up, stumbling about as the street see-sawed around him. Kasper lay on his back in the dirt, choking with laughter, reeking of cheap booze and sour smoke. Jezal made a lame attempt to brush the dirt from his uniform. There was a big wet patch on his chest that smelled of beer. 'Damn it!' he mumbled again. When had that happened?

He became aware of some shouting on the other side of the road. Two men grappling in a doorway. Jezal squinted hard, strained against the gloom. A big man had hold of some well-dressed fellow, and seemed to be tying his hands behind his back. Now he was forcing some kind of bag over his head. Jezal blinked in disbelief. It was far from a reputable area, but this seemed

somewhat strong.

The door of the tavern banged open and West and Jalenhorm came out, deep in drunken conversation, something about someone's sister. Bright light cut across the street and illuminated the two struggling men starkly. The big one was dressed all in black, with a mask over the lower part of his face. He had white hair, white eyebrows, skin white as milk. Jezal stared at the white devil across the road, and he glared back with narrowed pink eyes.

'Help!' It was the fellow with the bag on his head, his voice shrill with fear. 'Help, I am—' The white man dealt him a savage blow in the midriff and he folded up with a sigh.

'You there!' shouted West.

Jalenhorm was already rushing across the street.

'What?' said Kaspa, propped up on his elbows in the road.

Jezal's mind was full of mud, but his feet seemed to be following Jalenhorm, so he stumbled along with them, feeling very sick. West came behind him. The white ghost started up and turned to stand between them and his prisoner. Another man moved briskly out of the shadows, tall and thin, dressed all in black and masked, but with long greasy hair. He held up a gloved hand.

'Gentlemen,' his whining commoner's voice was muffled by his mask, 'gentlemen please, we're on the King's business!'

'The King conducts his business in the day-time,' growled Jalenhorm.

The new arrival's mask twitched slightly as he smiled. 'That's why he needs us for the night-time stuff, eh, friend?'

'Who is this man?' West was pointing at the fellow with the bag on his head.

The prisoner was struggling up again. 'I am Sepp dan – oof!' The white monster silenced him with a heavy fist in the face, knocking him limp into the road.

Jalenhorm put a hand on the hilt of his sword, jaw clenching, and the white ghost loomed forward with a terrible speed. Close up he was even more massive, alien, and terrifying. Jalenhorm took an involuntary step back, stumbled on the rutted surface of the road and pitched onto his back with a crash. Jezal's head was thumping.

'Back!' bellowed West. His sword whipped out of its scabbard with a faint ringing.

'Thaaaaah!' hissed the monster, fists clenched like two big white rocks.

'Aargh,' gurgled the man with the bag on his head.

Jezal's heart was in his mouth. He looked at the thin man. The thin man's eyes smiled back. How could anyone smile at a time like this? Jezal was surprised to see that he had a long, ugly knife in his hand. Where did that come from? He fumbled drunkenly for his sword.

'Major West!' came a voice from the shadows down the street. Jezal paused, uncertain, steel halfway out. Jalenhorm scrambled to his feet, the back of his uniform crusted with mud, pulled out his own sword. The pale monster stared at them unblinking, not retreating a finger's breadth.

'Major West!' came the voice again, accompanied now by a clicking, scraping sound. West's face had turned pale. A figure emerged from the shadows, limping badly, cane tapping on the dirt. His broad-brimmed hat

obscured the upper part of his face, but his mouth was twisted into a strange smile. Jezal noticed with a sudden wave of nausea that his four front teeth were missing. He shuffled towards them, ignoring all the naked steel, and offered his free hand to West.

The Major slowly sheathed his sword, took the hand and shook it limply. 'Colonel Glokta?' he asked in a husky voice.

'Your humble servant, though I'm no longer an army man. I'm with the King's Inquisition now.' He reached up slowly and removed his hat. His face was deathly pale, deeply lined, close-cropped hair scattered with grey. His eyes stared out feverish bright from deep, dark rings, the left one noticeably narrower than the right, pink-rimmed and glistening wet. 'And these are my assistants, Practicals Severard,' the lanky one gave a mockery of a bow, 'and Frost.'

The white monster jerked the prisoner to his feet with one hand. 'Hold on,' said Jalenhorm, stepping forward, but the Inquisitor put a gentle hand on his arm.

'This man is a prisoner of His Majesty's Inquisition, Lieutenant Jalenhorm.' The big man paused, surprised to be called by name. 'I realise your motives are of the best, but he is a criminal, a traitor. I have a warrant for him, signed by Arch Lector Sult himself. He is most unworthy of your assistance, believe me.'

Jalenhorm frowned and stared balefully at Practical Frost. The pale devil looked terrified. About as terrified as a stone. He hauled the prisoner over his shoulder without apparent effort and turned up the street. The one called Severard smiled with his eyes, sheathed his knife, bowed again and followed his companion, whistling tunelessly as he sauntered off.

The Inquisitor's left eyelid began to flutter and tears rolled down his pale cheek. He wiped it carefully on the back of his hand. 'Please forgive me. Honestly. It's coming to something when a man can't control his own eyes, eh? Damn weeping jelly. Sometimes I think I should just have it out, and make do with a patch.' Jezal's stomach roiled. 'How long has it been, West? Seven years? Eight?'

A muscle was working on the side of the Major's head. 'Nine.'

'Imagine that. Nine years. Can you believe it? It seems like only yesterday. It was on the ridge, wasn't it, where we parted?'

'On the ridge, yes.'

'Don't worry, West, I don't blame you in the least.' Glokta slapped the Major warmly on the arm. 'Not for that, anyway. You tried to talk me out of it, I remember. I had time enough to think about it in Gurkhul, after all. Lots of time to think. You were always a good friend to me. And now young Collem West, a Major in the King's Own, imagine that.' Jezal had not the slightest idea what they were talking about. He wanted only to be sick, then go to bed.

Inquisitor Glokta turned toward him with a smile, displaying once again the hideous gap in his teeth. 'And this must be Captain Luthar, for whom everyone has such high hopes in the coming Contest. Marshal Varuz is a hard master, is he not?' He waved his cane weakly at Jezal. 'Jab, jab, eh, Captain? Jab, jab.'

Jezal felt his bile rising. He coughed and looked down at his feet, willing the world to remain motionless. The Inquisitor looked around expectantly at

each of them in turn. West looked pale. Jalenhorm mud-stained and sulky. Kasper was still sitting in the road. None of them had anything to say.

Glokta cleared his throat. 'Well, duty calls,' he bowed stiffly, 'but I hope to see you all again. Very soon.' Jezal found himself hoping he never saw the man again.

'Perhaps we might fence again sometime?' muttered Major West.

Glokta gave a good natured laugh. 'Oh, I would enjoy that, West, but I find that I'm ever so slightly crippled these days. If you're after a fight, I'm sure that Practical Frost could oblige you,' he looked over at Jalenhorm, 'but I must warn you, he doesn't fight like a gentleman. I wish you all a pleasant evening.' He placed his hat back on his head then turned slowly and shuffled off down the dingy street.

The three officers watched him limp away in an interminable, awkward silence. Kasper finally stumbled over. 'What was all that about?' he asked.

'Nothing,' said West through gritted teeth. 'Best we forget it ever happened.'

Teeth and Fingers

Time is short. We must work quickly. Glokta nodded to Severard, and he smiled and pulled the bag off Sepp dan Teufel's head.

The Master of the Mints was a strong, noble-looking man. His face was already starting to bruise. 'What is the meaning of this?' he roared, all bluster and bravado. 'Do you know who I am?'

Glokta snorted. 'Of course we know who you are. Do you think we are in the habit of snatching people from the streets at random?'

'I am the Master of the Royal Mints!' yelled the prisoner, struggling at his bonds. Practical Frost looked on impassively, arms folded. The irons were already glowing orange in the brazier. 'How dare you ...'

'We cannot have these constant interruptions!' shouted Glokta. Frost kicked Teufel savagely in the shin and he yelped with pain. 'How can our prisoner sign his paper of confession if his hands are tied? Please release him.'

Teufel stared suspiciously around as the albino untied his wrists. Then he saw the cleaver. The polished blade shone mirror bright in the harsh lamp light. *Truly a thing of beauty. You'd like to have that, wouldn't you, Teufel? I bet you'd like to cut my head off with it.* Glokta almost hoped that he would, his right hand seemed to be reaching for it, but he used it to shove the paper of confession away instead.

'Ah,' said Glokta, 'the Master of the Mints is a right-handed gentleman.'

'A right-handed gentleman,' Severard hissed in the prisoner's ear.

Teufel was staring across the table through narrowed eyes. 'I know you! Glokta, isn't it? The one who was captured in Gurkhul, the one they tortured. Sand dan Glokta, am I right? Well, you're in over your head this time, I can tell you! Right in over your head! When High Justice Marovia hears about this ...'

Glokta sprang to his feet, his chair screeching on the tiles. His left leg was agony, but he ignored it. 'Look at this!' he hissed, then opened his mouth wide, giving the horrified prisoner a good look at his teeth. *Or what's left of them.* 'You see that? You see? Where they cracked out the teeth above, they left them below, and where they took them out below, they left them above, all the way to the back. See?' Glokta pulled his cheeks back with his fingers so Teufel could get a better view. 'They did it with a tiny chisel. A little bit each day. It took months.' Glokta sat down stiffly, then smiled wide.

'What excellent work, eh? The irony of it! To leave you half your teeth, but not a one of 'em any use! I have soup most days.' The Master of the Mints swallowed hard. Glokta could see a drop of sweat running down his neck. 'And the teeth were just the beginning. I have to piss sitting down like a woman, you know. I'm thirty-five years old, and I need help getting out of bed.' He leaned back again and stretched out his leg with a wince. 'Every day is its own little hell for me. Every day. So tell me, can you seriously believe

that anything you might say could scare me?’

Glokta studied his prisoner, taking his time. *No longer half so sure of himself.* ‘Confess,’ he whispered. ‘Then we can ship you off to Angland and still get some sleep tonight.’

Teufel’s face had turned almost as pale as Practical Frost’s, but he said nothing. *The Arch Lector will be here soon. Already on his way, most likely. If there is no confession when he arrives . . . we’ll all be off to Angland. At best.* Glokta took hold of his cane and got to his feet. ‘I like to think of myself as an artist, but artistry takes time and we have wasted half the evening searching for you in every brothel in the city. Thankfully, Practical Frost has a keen nose and an excellent sense of direction. He can sniff out a rat in a shithouse.’

‘A rat in a shithouse,’ echoed Severard, eyes glittering bright in the orange glow from the brazier.

‘We are on a tight schedule so let me be blunt. You will confess to me within ten minutes.’

Teufel snorted and folded his arms. ‘Never.’

‘Hold him.’ Frost seized the prisoner from behind and folded him in a vice-like grip, pinning his right arm to his side. Severard grabbed hold of his left wrist and spread his fingers out on the scarred table-top. Glokta curled his fist round the smooth grip of the cleaver, the blade scraping against the wood as he pulled it slowly towards him. He stared down at Teufel’s hand. *What beautiful fingernails he has. How long and glossy. You cannot work down a mine with nails like that.* Glokta raised the cleaver high.

‘Wait!’ screamed the prisoner.

Bang! The heavy blade bit deep into the table top, neatly paring off Teufel’s middle fingernail. He was breathing fast now, and there was a sheen of sweat on his forehead. *Now we’ll see what kind of a man you really are.*

‘I think you can see where this is going,’ said Glokta. ‘You know, they did it to a corporal who was captured with me, one cut a day. He was a tough man, very tough. They made it past his elbow before he died.’ Glokta lifted the cleaver again. ‘Confess.’

‘You couldn’t ...’

Bang! The cleaver took off the very tip of Teufel’s middle finger. Blood bubbled out on to the table top. Severard’s eyes were smiling in the lamp light. Teufel’s jaw dropped. *But the pain will be a while coming.* ‘Confess!’ bellowed Glokta.

Bang! The cleaver took off the top of Teufel’s ring finger, and a little disc out of his middle finger which rolled a short way and dropped off onto the floor. Frost’s face was carved from marble. ‘Confess!’

Bang! The tip of Teufel’s index finger jumped in the air. His middle finger was down to the first joint. Glokta paused, wiping the sweat from his forehead on the back of his hand. His leg was throbbing with the exertion. Blood was dripping onto the tiles with a steady tap, tap, tap. Teufel was staring wide-eyed at his shortened fingers.

Severard shook his head. ‘That’s excellent work, Inquisitor.’ He flicked one of the discs of flesh across the table. ‘The precision . . . I’m in awe.’

‘Aaaargh!’ screamed the Master of the Mints. *Now it dawns on him.* Glokta raised the cleaver once again.

'I will confess!' shrieked Teufel, 'I will confess!'

'Excellent,' said Glokta brightly.

'Excellent,' said Severard.

'Etherer,' said Practical Frost.

The Wide and Barren North

The Magi are an ancient and mysterious order, learned in the secrets of the world, practised in the ways of magic, wise and powerful beyond the dreams of men. That was the rumour. Such a one should have ways of finding a man, even a man alone in the wide and barren North. If that was so, then he was taking his time about it.

Logen scratched at his tangled beard and wondered what was keeping the great one. Perhaps he was lost. He asked himself again if he should have stayed in the forests, where food at least was plentiful. But to the south the spirits had said, and if you went south from the hills you came to these withered moors. So here he had waited in the briars and the mud, in bad weather, and mostly gone hungry.

His boots were worn out anyway, so he had set his miserable camp not far from the road, the better to see this wizard coming. Since the wars, the North was full of dangerous scum – deserting warriors turned bandit, peasants fled from their burned-out land, leaderless and desperate men with nothing left to lose, and so on. Logen wasn't worried, though. No one had a reason to come to this arsehole of the world. No one but him and the Magus.

So he sat and waited, looked for food, didn't find any, sat and waited some more. At this time of year the moors were often soaked by sudden downpours, but he would have smoky, thorny little fires by night if he could, to keep his flagging spirits up and attract any passing wizards. It had been raining this evening, but it had stopped a while before and it was dry enough for a fire. Now he had his pot over it, cooking a stew with the last of the meat he had brought with him from the forest. He would have to move on in the morning, and look for food. The Magus could catch up with him later, if he still cared.

He was stirring his meagre meal, and wondering whether to go back north or move on south tomorrow, when he heard the sound of hooves on the road. One horse, moving slowly. He sat back on his coat and waited. There was a neigh, the jingle of a harness. A rider came over the rise. With the watery sun low on the horizon behind, Logen couldn't see him clearly, but he sat stiff and awkward in his saddle, like a man not used to the road. He urged his horse gently in the direction of the fire and reined in a few yards away.

'Good evening,' he said.

He was not in the least what Logen had been expecting. A gaunt, pale, sickly-looking young man with dark rings round his eyes, long hair plastered to his head by the drizzle and a nervous smile. He seemed more wet than wise, and certainly didn't look powerful beyond the dreams of men. He looked mostly hungry, cold, and ill. He looked something like Logen felt, in fact.

'Shouldn't you have a staff?'

The young man looked surprised. 'I don't . . . that is to say . . . er . . . I'm not a Magus.' He trailed off and licked his lips nervously.

'The spirits told me to expect a Magus, but they're often wrong.'

'Oh . . . well, I'm an apprentice. But my Master, the great Bayaz,' and he bowed his head reverently, 'is none other than the First of the Magi, great in High Art and learned in deep wisdom. He sent me to find you,' he looked suddenly doubtful, 'and bring you . . . you are Logen Ninefingers?'

Logen held up his left hand and looked at the pale young man through the gap where his middle finger used to be. 'Oh good.' The apprentice breathed a sigh of relief, then suddenly stopped himself. 'Oh, that is to say . . . er . . . sorry about the finger.'

Logen laughed. It was the first time since he dragged himself out of the river. It wasn't very funny but he laughed loud. It felt good. The young man smiled and slipped painfully from the saddle. 'I am Malacus Quai.'

'Malacus what?'

'Quai,' he said, making for the fire.

'What kind of a name is that?'

'I am from the Old Empire.'

Logen had never heard of any such place. 'An empire, eh?' 'Well, it was, once. The mightiest nation in the Circle of the World.' The young man squatted down stiffly by the fire. 'But the glory of the past is long faded. It's not much more than a huge battlefield now.' Logen nodded. He knew well enough what one of those looked like. 'It's far away. In the west of the world.' The apprentice waved his hand vaguely.

Logen laughed again. 'That's east.'

Quai smiled sadly. 'I am a seer, though not, it seems, a very good one. Master Bayaz sent me to find you, but the stars have not been auspicious and I became lost in the bad weather.' He pushed his hair out of his eyes and spread his hands. 'I had a packhorse, with food and supplies, and another horse for you, but I lost them in a storm. I fear I am no outdoorsman.'

'Seems not.'

Quai took a flask from his pocket and leaned across with it. Logen took it from him, opened it, took a swig. The hot liquor ran down his throat, warmed him to the roots of his hair. 'Well, Malacus Quai, you lost your food but you kept hold of what really mattered. It takes an effort to make me smile these days. You're right welcome at my fire.'

'Thank you.' The apprentice paused and held his palms out to the meagre flames. 'I haven't eaten for two days.' He shook his head, hair flapping back and forth. 'It has been . . . a difficult time.' He licked his lips and looked at the pot.

Logen passed him the spoon. Malacus Quai stared at it with big round eyes. 'Have you eaten?'

Logen nodded. He hadn't, but the wretched apprentice looked famished and there was barely enough for one. He took another swig from the flask. That would do for him, for now. Quai attacked the stew with relish. When it was done he scraped the pot out, licked the spoon, then licked the edge of the pot for good measure. He sat back against a big rock. 'I am forever in your debt, Logen Ninefingers, you've saved my life. I hardly dared hope you'd be so gracious a host.'

'You're not quite what I expected either, being honest.' Logen pulled at the

flask again, and licked his lips. 'Who is this Bayaz?'

'The First of the Magi, great in High Art and learned in deep wisdom. I fear he will be most seriously displeased with me.'

'He's to be feared, then?'

'Well,' replied the apprentice weakly, 'he does have a bit of a temper.'

Logen took another swallow. The warmth was spreading through his body now, the first time he had felt warm in weeks. There was a pause. 'What does he want from me, Quai?'

There was no reply. The soft sound of snoring came from across the fire. Logen smiled and, wrapping himself in his coat, lay down to sleep as well.

The apprentice woke with a sudden fit of coughing. It was early morning and the dingy world was thick with mist. It was probably better that way. There was nothing to see but miles of mud, rock, and miserable brown gorse. Everything was coated in cold dew, but Logen had managed to get a sad tongue of fire going. Quai's hair was plastered to his pallid face. He rolled onto his side and coughed phlegm onto the ground.

'Aaargh,' he croaked. He coughed and spat again.

Logen secured the last of his meagre gear on the unhappy horse. 'Morning,' he said, looking up at the white sky, 'though not a good one.'

'I will die. I will die, and then I will not have to move.'

'We've got no food, so if we stay here you will die. Then I can eat you and go back over the mountains.'

The apprentice smiled weakly. 'What do we do?'

What indeed? 'Where do we find this Bayaz?'

'At the Great Northern Library.'

Logen had never heard of it, but then he'd never been that interested in books. 'Which is where?'

'It's south of here, about four days' ride, beside a great lake.'

'Do you know the way?'

The apprentice tottered to his feet and stood, swaying slightly, breathing fast and shallow. He was ghostly pale and his face had a sheen of sweat. 'I think so,' he muttered, but he hardly looked certain.

Neither Quai nor his horse would make four days without food, even providing they didn't get lost. Food had to be the first thing. To follow the road through the woods to the south was the best option, despite the greater risk. They might get killed by bandits, but the forage would be better, and the hunger would likely kill them otherwise.

'You'd better ride,' said Logen.

'I lost the horses, I should be the one to walk.'

Logen put his hand on Quai's forehead. It was hot and clammy. 'You've a fever. You'd better ride.'

The apprentice didn't try to argue. He looked down at Logen's ragged boots. 'Can you take my boots?'

Logen shook his head. 'Too small.' He knelt down over the smouldering remains of the fire and pursed his lips.

'What are you doing?'

'Fires have spirits. I will keep this one under my tongue, and we can use it to light another fire later.' Quai looked too ill to be surprised. Logen sucked up

the spirit, coughed on the smoke, shuddered at the bitter taste. 'You ready to leave?'

The apprentice raised his arms in a hopeless gesture. 'I am packed.'

Malacus Quai loved to talk. He talked as they made their way south across the moors, as the sun climbed into the grimy skies, as they entered the woods toward evening time. His illness did nothing to stop his chatter, but Logen didn't mind. It was a long time since anyone had talked to him, and it helped to take his mind off his feet. He was starving and tired, but it was his feet that were the problem. His boots were tatters of old leather, his toes cut and battered, his calf was still burning from the Shanka's teeth. Every step was an ordeal. Once they had called him the most feared man in the North. Now he was afraid of the smallest sticks and stones in the road. There was a joke in there somewhere. He winced as his foot hit a pebble.

'... so I spent seven years studying with Master Zacharus. He is great among the Magi, the fifth of Juvens' twelve apprentices, a great man.' Everything connected with the Magi seemed to be great in Quai's eyes. 'He felt I was ready to come to the Great Northern Library and study with Master Bayaz, to earn my staff. But things have not been easy for me here. Master Bayaz is most demanding and ...'

The horse stopped and snorted, shied and took a hesitant step back. Logen sniffed the air and frowned. There were men nearby, and badly washed ones. He should have noticed it sooner but his attention had been on his feet. Quai looked down at him. 'What is it?'

As if in answer a man stepped out from behind a tree perhaps ten strides ahead, another a little further down the road. They were scum, without a doubt. Dirty, bearded, dressed in ragged bits of mismatched fur and leather. Not, on the whole, unlike Logen. The skinny one on the left had a spear with a barbed head. The big one on the right had a heavy sword speckled with rust, and an old dented helmet with a spike on top. They moved forward, grinning. There was a sound behind and Logen looked over his shoulder, his heart sinking. A third man, with a big boil on his face, was making his way cautiously down the road toward them, a heavy wood axe in his hands.

Quai leaned down from his saddle, eyes wide with fear. 'Are they bandits?'

'You're the fucking seer,' hissed Logen through gritted teeth.

They stopped a stride or two in front. The one with the helmet seemed to be in charge. 'Nice horse,' he growled. 'Would you lend it to us?' The one with the spear grinned as he took hold of the bridle.

Things had taken a turn for the worse alright. A moment ago that had hardly seemed possible, but fate had found a way. Logen doubted that Quai would be much use in a fight. That left him alone against three or more, and with only a knife. If he did nothing him and Malacus would end up robbed, and more than likely killed. You have to be realistic about these things.

He looked the three bandits over again. They didn't expect a fight, not from two unarmed men – the spear was sideways on, the sword pointed at the ground. He didn't know about the axe, so he'd have to trust to luck with that one. It's a sorry fact that the man who strikes first usually strikes last, so Logen turned to the one with the helmet and spat the spirit in his face.

It ignited in the air and pounced on him hungrily. His head burst into

spitting flames, the sword clattered to the ground. He clawed desperately at his face and his arms caught fire as well. He reeled screaming away.

Quai's horse startled at the flames and reared up, snorting. The skinny man stumbled back with a gasp and Logen leaped at him, grabbed the shaft of the spear with one hand and butted him in the face. His nose crunched against Logen's forehead and he staggered away with blood streaming down his chin. Logen jerked him back with the spear, swung his right arm round in a wide arc and punched him in the neck. He went down with a gurgle and Logen tore the spear from his hands.

He felt movement behind him and dropped to the ground, rolling away to his left. The axe whistled through the air above his head and cut a long slash in the horse's side, spattering drops of blood across the ground and ripping the buckle on the saddle girth open. Boil-face tottered away, spinning around after his axe. Logen sprang at him but his ankle twisted on a stone and he tottered like a drunkard, yelping at the pain. An arrow hummed past his face from somewhere in the trees behind and was lost in the bushes on the other side of the road. The horse snorted and kicked, eyes rolling madly, then took off down the road at a crazy gallop. Malacus Quai wailed as the saddle slid off its back and he was flung into the bushes.

There was no time to think about him. Logen charged at the axe-man with a roar, aiming the spear at his heart. He brought his axe up in time to nudge the point away, but not far enough. The spear spitted him through the shoulder, spun him round. There was a sharp crack as the shaft snapped, Logen lost his balance and pitched forward, bearing Boil-face down into the road. The spear-point sticking out of his back cut a deep gash into Logen's scalp as he fell on top of him. Logen seized hold of the axe-man's matted hair with both hands, pulled his head back and mashed his face into a rock.

He lurched to his feet, head spinning, wiping blood out of his eyes just in time to see an arrow zip out of the trees and thud into a trunk a stride or two away. Logen hurtled at the archer. He saw him now, a boy no more than fourteen, reaching for another arrow. Logen pulled out his knife. The boy was nocking the arrow to his bow, but his eyes were wide with panic. He fumbled the string and drove the arrow through his hand, looking greatly surprised.

Logen was on him. The boy swung the bow at him but he ducked below it and jumped forward, driving the knife up with both hands. The blade caught the boy under the chin and lifted him into the air, then snapped off in his neck. He dropped on top of Logen, the jagged shard of the knife cutting a long gash in his arm. Blood splattered everywhere, from the cut on Logen's head, from the cut on Logen's arm, from the gaping wound in the boy's throat.

He shoved the corpse away, staggered against a tree and gasped for breath. His heart was pounding, the blood roaring in his ears, his stomach turning over. 'I am still alive,' he whispered, 'I am still alive.' The cuts on his head and his arm were starting to throb. Two more scars. It could have been a lot worse. He scraped the blood from his eyes and limped back to the road.

Malacus Quai was standing, staring ashen-faced at the three corpses. Logen took him by the shoulders, looked him up and down. 'You hurt?'

Quai only stared at the bodies. 'Are they dead?'

The corpse of the big one with the helmet was still smoking, making a

disgustingly appetising smell. He had a good pair of boots on, Logen noticed, a lot better than his own. The one with the boil had his neck turned too far around to be alive, that and he had the broken spear through him. Logen rolled the skinny one over with his foot. He still had a look of surprise on his bloody face, eyes staring up at the sky, mouth open.

‘Must’ve crushed his windpipe,’ muttered Logen. His hands were covered in blood. He grabbed one with the other to stop them from trembling.

‘What about the one in the trees?’

Logen nodded. ‘What happened to the horse?’

‘Gone,’ muttered Quai hopelessly. ‘What do we do?’

‘We see if they’ve got any food.’ Logen pointed to the smoking corpse. ‘And you help me get his boots off.’

Fencing Practice

'Press him, Jezal, press him! Don't be shy!' Jezal was only too willing to oblige. He sprang forward, lunging with his right. West was already off balance and he stumbled back, all out of form, only just managing to parry with his short steel. They were using half-edged blades today, to add a little danger to the proceedings. You couldn't really stab a man with one, but you could give him a painful scratch or two, if you tried hard enough. Jezal intended to give the Major a scratch for yesterday's humiliation.

'That's it, give him hell! Jab, jab, Captain! Jab, jab!'

West made a clumsy cut, but Jezal saw it coming and swatted the steel aside, still pressing forward, jabbing for all he was worth. He slashed with the left, and again. West blocked desperately, staggered back against the wall. Jezal had him at last. He cackled with glee as he lunged forward again with the long steel, but his opponent had come suddenly and surprisingly alive. West slipped away, shoved the lunge aside with disappointing firmness. Jezal stumbled forward, off balance, gave a shocked gasp as the point of his sword found a gap between two stones and his steel was wrenched out of his numb hand, lodged there wobbling in the wall.

West darted forward, ducked inside Jezal's remaining blade and slammed into him with his shoulder. 'Ooof,' said Jezal as he staggered back and crashed to the floor, fumbling his short steel. It skittered across the stones and Lord Marshal Varuz caught it smartly under his foot. The blunted point of West's sword hovered over Jezal's throat.

'Damn it!' he cursed, as the grinning Major offered him his hand.

'Yes,' murmured Varuz with a deep sigh, 'damn it indeed. An even more detestable performance than yesterday's, if that's possible! You let Major West make a fool of you again!' Jezal slapped West's hand away with a scowl and got to his feet. 'He never once lost control of that bout! You allowed yourself to be drawn in, and then disarmed! Disarmed! My grandson would not have made that mistake, and he is eight years old!' Varuz whacked at the floor with his stick. 'Explain to me please, Captain Luthar, how you will win a fencing match from a prone position, and without your steels?'

Jezal sulked and rubbed the back of his head.

'No? In future, if you fall off a cliff carrying your steels, I want to see you smashed to bits at the bottom, gripping them tightly in your dead fingers, do you hear me?'

'Yes, Marshal Varuz,' mumbled a sullen Jezal, wishing the old bastard would take a tumble off a cliff himself. Or perhaps the Tower of Chains. That would be adequate. Maybe Major West could join him.

'Over-confidence is a curse to the swordsman! You must treat every opponent as though he will be your last. As for your footwork,' and Varuz curled his lip with disgust, 'fine and fancy coming forward, but put you on the

back foot and you quite wither away. The Major only had to tap you and you fell down like a fainting schoolgirl.'

West grinned across at him. He was loving this. Absolutely loving it, damn him.

'They say Bremer dan Gorst has a back leg like a pillar of steel. A pillar of steel they say! It would be easier to knock down the House of the Maker than him.' The Lord Marshal pointed over at the outline of the huge tower, looming up over the buildings of the courtyard. 'The House of the Maker!' he shouted in disgust.

Jezal sniffed and kicked at the floor with his boot. For the hundredth time he entertained the notion of giving it up and never holding a steel again. But what would people say? His father was absurdly proud of him, always boasting about his skill to anyone who would listen. He had his heart set on seeing his son fight in the Square of Marshals before a screaming crowd. If Jezal threw it over now his father would be mortified, and he could say goodbye to his commission, goodbye to his allowance, goodbye to his ambitions. No doubt his brothers would love that.

'Balance is the key,' Varuz was spouting. 'Your strength rises up through the legs! From now on we will add an hour on the beam to your training. Every day.' Jezal winced. 'So: a run, exercises with the heavy bar, forms, an hour of sparring, forms again, an hour on the beam.' The Lord Marshal nodded with satisfaction. 'That will suffice, for now. I will see you at six o'clock tomorrow morning, ice cold sober.' Varuz frowned. 'Ice. Cold. Sober.'

'I can't do this forever, you know,' said Jezal as he hobbled stiffly back towards his quarters. 'How much of this horrible shit should a man have to take?'

West grinned. 'This is nothing. I've never seen the old bastard so soft on anyone. He must really like you. He wasn't half so friendly with me.'

Jezal wasn't sure he believed it. 'Worse than this?'

'I didn't have the grounding that you've had. He made me hold the heavy bar over my head all afternoon until it fell on me.' The Major winced slightly, as though even the memory was painful. 'He made me run up and down the Tower of Chains in full armour. He had me sparring four hours a day, every day.'

'How did you put up with it?'

'I didn't have a choice. I'm not a nobleman. Fencing was the only way for me to get noticed. But it paid off in the end. How many commoners do you know with a commission in the King's Own?'

Jezal shrugged. 'Come to think of it, very few.' As a nobleman himself, he didn't think there should be any.

'But you're from a good family, and a Captain already. If you can win the Contest there's no telling how far you could go. Hoff – the Lord Chamberlain, Marovia – the High Justice, Varuz himself for that matter, they were all champions in their day. Champions with the right blood always go on to great things.'

Jezal snorted. 'Like your friend Sand dan Glokta?'

The name dropped between them like a stone. 'Well . . . almost always.'

'Major West!' came a rough voice from behind. A thickset sergeant with a

scar down his cheek was hurrying over to them.

‘Sergeant Forest, how are you?’ asked West, clapping the soldier warmly on the back. He had a touch with peasants, but then Jezal had to keep reminding himself that West was little better than a peasant himself. He might be educated, and an officer, and so forth, but he still had more in common with the sergeant than he did with Jezal, once you thought about it.

The sergeant beamed. ‘Very well, thank you, sir.’ He nodded respectfully to Jezal. ‘Morning, Captain.’

Jezal favoured him with a terse nod and turned away to look up the avenue. He could think of no possible reason why an officer would want to be familiar with the common soldiers. Furthermore, he was scarred and ugly. Jezal had no use whatever for ugly people.

‘What can I do for you?’ West was asking.

‘Marshal Burr wishes to see you, sir, for an urgent briefing. All senior officers are ordered to attend.’

West’s face clouded. ‘I’ll be there as soon as I can.’ The sergeant saluted and strode off.

‘What’s all that about?’ asked Jezal carelessly, watching some clerk chase around after a paper he had dropped.

‘Angland. This King of the Northmen, Bethod.’ West said the name with a scowl, as though it left a bitter taste. ‘They say he’s defeated all his enemies in the North, and now he’s spoiling for a fight with The Union.’

‘Well, if it’s a fight he wants,’ said Jezal airily. Wars were a fine thing, in his opinion, an excellent opportunity for glory and advancement. The paper fluttered past his boot on the light breeze, closely followed by the puffing clerk. Jezal grinned at him as he hurried past, bent almost double in his clumsy efforts to try and grab it.

The Major snatched up the grubby document and handed it over. ‘Thank you, sir,’ said the clerk, his sweaty face quite pitiful with gratitude, ‘thank you so much!’

‘Think nothing of it,’ murmured West, and the clerk gave a sycophantic little bow and hurried away. Jezal was disappointed. He had been rather enjoying the chase. ‘There could be war, but that’s the least of my troubles right now.’ West breathed a heavy sigh. ‘My sister is in Adua.’

‘I didn’t know you had a sister.’

‘Well I do, and she’s here.’

‘So?’ Jezal had little enthusiasm for hearing about the Major’s sister. West might have pulled himself up, but the rest of his family were distinctly beneath Jezal’s notice. He was interested in meeting poor, common girls he could take advantage of, and rich, noble ones he might think about marrying. Anything in between was of no importance.

‘Well, my sister can be charming but she is also a little . . . unconventional. She can be something of a handful in the wrong mood. Truth be told, I’d prefer to take care of a pack of Northmen than her.’

‘Come now, West,’ said Jezal absently, hardly taking any notice of what he was saying, ‘I’m sure she can’t be that difficult.’

The Major brightened. ‘Well, I’m relieved to hear you say that. She’s always been keen to see the Agriont for herself, and I’ve been saying for years that I’d

give her a tour if she ever came here. We'd arranged it for today in fact.' Jezal had a sinking feeling. 'Now, with this meeting—'

'But I have so little time these days!' whined Jezal.

'I promise I'll make it up to you. We'll meet you at my quarters in an hour.'

'Hold on . . .' But West was already striding away.

Don't let her be too ugly, Jezal was thinking as he slowly approached the door to Major West's quarters and raised his unwilling fist to knock. Just don't let her be too ugly. And not too stupid either. Anything but an afternoon wasted on a stupid girl. His hand was halfway to the door when he became aware of raised voices on the other side. He stood guiltily in the corridor, his ear drawing closer and closer to the wood, hoping to hear something complimentary about himself.

' . . . and what about your maid?' came Major West's muffled voice, sounding greatly annoyed.

'I had to leave her at the house, there was a lot to do. Nobody's been there in months.' West's sister. Jezal's heart sank. A deep voice, she sounded like a fat one. Jezal couldn't afford to be seen walking about the Agriont with a fat girl on his arm. It could ruin his reputation.

'But you can't just wander about the city on your own!'

'I got here alright, didn't I? You're forgetting who we are, Collem. I can make do without a servant. To most of the people here I'm no better than a servant anyway. Besides, I'll have your friend Captain Luthar to look after me.'

'That's even worse, as you damn well know!'

'Well I wasn't to know that you'd be busy. I would've thought you'd make the time to see your own sister.' She didn't sound an idiot, which was something, but fat and now peevish too. 'Aren't I safe with your friend?'

'He's a good enough sort, but is he safe with you?' Jezal wasn't sure what the Major meant by that little comment. 'And walking about the Agriont alone, and with a man you hardly know? Don't play the fool, I know you better than that! What will people think?'

'Shit on what they think.' Jezal jerked away from the door. He wasn't used to hearing ladies use that sort of language. Fat, peevish and coarse, damn it. This might be even worse than he'd feared. He looked up the corridor, considering making a run for it, already working out his excuse. Curse his bad luck, though, someone was coming up the stairs now. He couldn't leave without being seen. He would just have to knock and get it over with. He gritted his teeth and pounded resentfully at the door.

The voices stopped suddenly, and Jezal put on an unconvincing friendly grin. Let the torture begin. The door swung open.

For some reason, he had been expecting a kind of shorter, fatter version of Major West, in a dress. He had been greatly mistaken. She was perhaps slightly fuller of figure than was strictly fashionable, since skinny girls were all the rage, but you couldn't call her fat, not fat at all. She had dark hair, dark skin, a little darker than would generally be thought ideal. He knew that a lady should remain out of the sun whenever possible, but looking at her, he really couldn't remember why. Her eyes were very dark, almost black, and blue eyes were turning the heads this season, but hers shone in the dim light of the doorway in a rather bewitching manner.

She smiled at him. A strange sort of smile, higher on one side than the other. It gave him a slightly uneasy feeling, as though she knew something funny that he didn't. Still, excellent teeth, all white and shiny. Jezal's anger was swiftly vanishing. The longer he looked at her the more her looks grew on him, and the emptier his head became of cogent thought.

'Hello,' she said.

His mouth opened slightly, as if by force of habit, but nothing came out. His mind was a blank page.

'And you must be Captain Luthar?'

'Er ...'

'I'm Collem's sister, Ardee,' she slapped her forehead. 'I'm such an idiot though, Collem will have told you all about me. I know the two of you are great friends.'

Jezal glanced awkwardly at the Major, who was frowning back at him and looking somewhat put out. It would hardly do to say he had been entirely unaware of her existence until that morning. He struggled to frame even a mildly amusing reply, but nothing came to mind.

Ardee took hold of him by the elbow and drew him into the room, talking all the while. 'I know you're a great fencer, but I've been told your wit is even sharper than your sword. So much so in fact, that you only use your sword upon your friends, as your wit is far too deadly.' She looked at him expectantly. Silence.

'Well,' he mumbled, 'I do fence a bit.' Pathetic. Utterly awful.

'Is this the right man, or do I have the gardener here?' She looked him over with a strange expression, hard to read. Perhaps it was the same sort of look Jezal would have while examining a horse he was thinking of buying: cautious, searching, intent, and ever so slightly disdainful. 'Even the gardeners have splendid uniforms, it seems.'

Jezal was almost sure that had been some kind of insult, but he was too busy trying to think of something witty to pay it too much mind. He knew he would have to speak now or spend the entire day in embarrassed silence, so he opened his mouth and trusted to luck. 'I'm sorry if I seem dumbfounded, but Major West is such an unattractive man. How could I have expected so beautiful a sister?'

West snorted with laughter. His sister raised an eyebrow, and counted the points off on her fingers. 'Mildly offensive to my brother, which is good. Somewhat amusing, which is also good. Honest, which is refreshing, and wildly complimentary to me, which, of course, is excellent. A little late, but on the whole worth waiting for.' She looked Jezal in the eye. 'The afternoon might not be a total loss.'

Jezal wasn't sure he liked that last comment, and he wasn't sure he liked the way she looked at him, but he was enjoying looking at her, so he was prepared to forgive a lot. The women of his acquaintance rarely said anything clever, especially the fine-looking ones. He supposed they were trained to smile and nod and listen while the men did the talking. On the whole he agreed with that way of doing things, but the cleverness sat well on West's sister, and she had more than caught his curiosity. Fat and peevish were off the menu, of that there could be no doubt. As for coarse, well, handsome

people are never coarse, are they? Just . . . unconventional. He was beginning to think that the afternoon, as she had said, might not be a total loss.

West made for the door. 'It seems I must leave you two to make fools of one another. Lord Marshal Burr is expecting me. Don't do anything I wouldn't, eh?' The comment seemed to be aimed at Jezal, but West was looking at his sister.

'That would seem to allow virtually everything,' she said, catching Jezal's eye. He was amazed to feel himself blushing like a little girl, and he coughed and looked down at his shoes.

West rolled his eyes. 'Mercy,' he said, as the door clicked shut.

'Would you care for a drink?' Ardee asked, already pouring wine into a glass. Alone with a beautiful young woman. Hardly a new experience, Jezal told himself, and yet he seemed to be lacking his usual confidence.

'Yes, thank you, most kind.' Yes, a drink, a drink, just the thing to steady the nerves. She held the glass out to him and poured another for herself. He wondered if a young lady should be drinking at this time of day, but it seemed pointless to say anything. She wasn't his sister, after all.

'Tell me, Captain, how do you know my brother?'

'Well, he's my commanding officer, and we fence together.' His brain was beginning to function again. 'But then . . . you know that already.'

She grinned at him. 'Of course, but my governess always maintained that young men should be allowed their share of the conversation.'

Jezal gave an ungainly cough as he was swallowing and spilled some wine down his jacket. 'Oh dear,' he said.

'Here, take this a moment.' She gave him her glass and he took it without thinking, but then found himself without a free hand. When she started dabbing at his chest with a white handkerchief he could hardly object, though it did seem rather forward. Being honest, he might have objected if she wasn't so damn fine-looking. He wondered if she realised what an excellent view she was giving him down the front of her dress, but of course not, how could she? She was simply new here, unused to courtly manners, the artless ways of a country girl and so forth . . . nice view though, there was no denying that.

'There, that's better,' she said, though the dabbing had made no apparent difference. Not to his uniform anyway. She took the glasses from him, drained her own quickly with a practised flick of her head and shoved them on the table. 'Shall we go?'

'Yes . . . of course. Oh,' and he offered her his arm.

She led him out into the corridor and down the stairs, chatting freely. It was a flurry of conversational blows and, as Marshal Varuz had pointed out earlier, his defence was weak. He parried desperately as they made their way across the wide Square of Marshals, but he could barely get a word in. It seemed as though it was Ardee who had been living there for years and Jezal who was the bumpkin from the provinces.

'The Halls Martial are behind there?' She nodded over at the looming wall that separated the headquarters of the Union's armies from the rest of the Agriont.

'Indeed they are. That is where the Lord Marshals have their offices, and so forth. And there are barracks there, and armouries, and, er . . .' He trailed off.

He could not think of much else to say, but Ardee came to his rescue.

‘So my brother must be somewhere in there. He’s quite the famous soldier, I suppose. First through the breach at Ulrioch, and so on.’

‘Well, yes, Major West is very well respected here ...’

‘He can be such a bore, though, can’t he? He does so love to be mysterious and troubled.’ She put on a faint, faraway smile and rubbed her chin thoughtfully, just as her brother might have done. She had captured the man perfectly, and Jezal had to laugh, but he was starting to wonder if she should be walking quite so close beside him, holding his arm in quite so intimate a way. Not that he objected of course. Quite the reverse, but people were looking.

‘Ardee—’ he said.

‘So this must be the Kingsway.’

‘Er, yes, Ardee—’

She was gazing up at the magnificent statue of Harod the Great, his stern eyes fixed on the middle distance. ‘Harod the Great?’ she asked.

‘Er, yes. In the dark ages, before there was a Union, he fought to bring the Three Kingdoms together. He was the first High King.’ You idiot, thought Jezal, she knows that already, everyone does. ‘Ardee, I think your brother would not—’

‘And this is Bayaz, the First of the Magi?’

‘Yes, he was Harod’s most trusted adviser. Ardee—’

‘Is it true they still keep a vacant seat for him in the Closed Council?’

Jezal was taken aback. ‘I’d heard that there’s an empty chair there, but I didn’t know that—’

‘They all look so serious, don’t they?’

‘Er . . . I suppose those were serious times,’ he said, grinning lamely.

A Knight Herald thundered down the avenue on a huge, well-lathered horse, the sun glinting on the golden wings of his helmet. Secretaries scattered to let him pass, and Jezal tried to guide Ardee gently out of the way. To his great dismay she refused to be moved. The horse flashed past within a few inches of her, close enough for the wind to flick her hair in Jezal’s face. She turned to him with a flush of excitement on her cheek, otherwise utterly undaunted by her brush with severe injury.

‘A Knight Herald?’ she asked, taking Jezal’s arm once again and leading him off down the Kingsway.

‘Yes,’ squeaked Jezal, desperately trying to bring his voice under control, ‘the Knights Herald are entrusted with a grave responsibility. They carry messages from the King to every part of the Union.’ His heart had stopped hammering. ‘Even across the Circle Sea to Angland, Dagoska, and Westport. They are entrusted to speak with the King’s voice, and so forbidden from speaking except on the King’s business.’

‘Fedor dan Haden was on the boat on our way over, he’s a Knight Herald. We talked for hours.’ Jezal attempted unsuccessfully to contain his surprise. ‘We talked about Adua, about the Union, about his family. Your name was mentioned, actually.’ Jezal failed to look nonchalant once again. ‘In connection with the coming Contest.’ Ardee leaned even closer to him. ‘Fedor was of the opinion that Bremer dan Gorst will cut you to pieces.’

Jezal gave a strangled cough, but he rallied well. 'Unfortunately, that opinion seems widely held.'

'But not by you, I trust?'

'Er . . .'

She stopped and took him by the hand, staring earnestly into his eyes. 'I'm sure that you'll get the better of him, no matter what they say. My brother speaks very highly of you, and he's stingy with his praise.'

'Er . . .' mumbled Jezal. His fingers were tingling pleasantly. Her eyes were big and dark, and he found himself greatly at a loss for words. She had this way of biting on her lower lip that made his thoughts stray. A fine, full lip. He wouldn't have minded having a little chew on it himself. 'Well, thank you.' He gave a gormless grin.

'So this is the park,' said Ardee, turning away from him to admire the greenery. 'It's even more beautiful than I'd imagined.'

'Erm . . . yes.'

'How wonderful, to be at the heart of things. I've spent so much of my life on the edge. There must be many important decisions made here, many important people.' Ardee allowed her hand to trail through the fronds of a willow tree by the road. 'Collem's worried there might be war in the North. He was worried for my safety. I think that's why he wanted me to come here. I think he worries too much. What do you think, Captain Luthar?'

He had been in blissful ignorance of the political situation until a couple of hours before, but that would never do as a reply. 'Well,' he said, straining to remember the name, and then with relief, 'this Bethod could do with a rap on the knuckles.'

'They say he has twenty thousand Northmen under his banner.' She leaned towards him. 'Barbarians,' she murmured. 'Savages,' she whispered. 'I heard he skins his captives alive.'

Jezal thought this was hardly suitable conversation for a young lady. 'Ardee . . .' he began.

'But I'm sure with men like you and my brother to protect us, we womenfolk have nothing to worry about.' And she turned and made off up the path. Jezal had to hurry once again to catch up.

'And is that the House of the Maker?' Ardee nodded towards the grim outline of the huge tower.

'Why, yes it is.'

'Does no one go inside?'

'No one. Not in my lifetime anyway. The bridge is kept behind lock and key.' He frowned up at the tower. Seemed strange now, that he never thought about it. Living in the Agriont, it was always there. You just got used to it somehow. 'The place is sealed, I believe.'

'Sealed?' Ardee moved very close to him. Jezal glanced around nervously but nobody was looking. 'Isn't it strange that nobody goes in there? Isn't it a mystery?' He could almost feel her breath on his neck, 'I mean to say, why not just break the door down?'

Jezal was finding it horribly difficult to concentrate with her so close. He wondered for a moment, both frightening and exciting, whether she might be flirting with him? No, no, of course not! Just not used to the city was all. The

artless ways of a country girl . . . but then she was *very* close. If only she were a little less attractive or a little less confident. If only she were a little less . . . West's sister.

He coughed and looked off down the path, hoping vainly for a distraction. There were a few people moving along it, but no one that he recognised, unless . . . Ardee's spell was suddenly broken, and Jezal felt his skin go cold. A hunched figure, overdressed on this sunny day, was limping toward them, leaning heavily on a cane. He was bent over and wincing with every step, the faster-moving travellers giving him a wide berth. Jezal tried to steer Ardee away before he saw them, but she resisted gracefully and made a direct line for the shambling Inquisitor.

His head snapped up as they approached and his eyes glinted with recognition. Jezal's heart sank. There was no avoiding him now.

'Why, Captain Luthar,' said Glokta warmly, shuffling a little too close and shaking his hand, 'what a pleasure! I'm surprised that Varuz has let you go so early in the day. He must be mellowing in his old age.'

'The Lord Marshal is still most demanding,' snapped Jezal.

'I hope my Practicals didn't inconvenience you the other night.' The Inquisitor shook his head sadly. 'They have no manners. No manners at all. But they are the very best at what they do! I swear, the King doesn't have two more valuable servants.'

'I suppose we all serve the King in our own way.' There was a little more hostility in Jezal's voice than he had intended.

If Glokta was offended he didn't show it. 'Quite so. I don't believe I know your friend.'

'No. This is—'

'Actually, we've met,' said Ardee, much to Jezal's surprise, giving her hand to the Inquisitor. 'Ardee West.'

Glokta's eyebrows rose. 'No!' He bent down stiffly to kiss the back of her hand. Jezal saw his mouth twist as he straightened up, but the toothless grin soon returned. 'Collem West's sister! But you are so much changed.'

'For the better, I hope,' she laughed. Jezal felt horribly uncomfortable.

'Why – yes indeed,' said Glokta.

'And you are changed also, Sand.' Ardee looked suddenly very sad. 'We were all so worried in my family. We hoped and hoped for your safe return.' Jezal saw a spasm run over Glokta's face. 'Then when we heard you were hurt . . . how are you?'

The Inquisitor glanced at Jezal, his eyes cold as a slow death. Jezal stared down at his boots, a lump of fear in his throat. He had no need to be scared of this cripple, did he? But somehow he wished he was still at fencing practice. Glokta stared at Ardee, his left eye twitching slightly, and she looked back at him undaunted, her eyes full of quiet concern.

'I am well. As well as can be expected.' His expression had turned very strange. Jezal felt more uncomfortable than ever. 'Thank you for asking. Truly. Nobody ever does.'

There was an awkward silence. The Inquisitor stretched his neck sideways and there was a loud click. 'Ah!' he said, 'that's got it. It's been a pleasure to see you again, both of you, but duty calls.' He treated them to another

revolting smile then hobbled off, his left foot scraping in the gravel.

Ardee frowned at his twisted back as he limped slowly away. 'It's so sad,' she said under her breath.

'What?' mumbled Jezal. He was thinking about that big white bastard in the street, those narrow pink eyes. The prisoner with the bag on his head. We all serve the King in our own way. Quite so. He gave an involuntary shiver.

'He and my brother used to be quite close. He came to stay with us one summer. My family were so proud to have him it was embarrassing. He used to fence with my brother every day, and he always won. The way he moved, it was something to see. Sand dan Gloкта. He was the brightest star in the sky.' She flashed her knowing half-smile again. 'And now I hear you are.'

'Er . . .' said Jezal, not sure whether she was praising him or poking fun. He could not escape the feeling that he had been out-fenced twice that day, once by each sibling.

He rather fancied that the sister had given him the worse beating.

The Morning Ritual

It was a bright summer's day, and the park was filled to capacity with colourful revellers. Colonel Glokta strode manfully toward some meeting of great importance, people bowing and scraping respectfully away to give him room. He ignored most, favoured the more important ones with his brilliant smile. The lucky few beamed back at him, delighted to be noticed.

'I suppose we all serve the King in our own way,' whined Captain Luthar, reaching for his steel, but Glokta was far too quick for him. His blade flashed with lightning speed, catching the sneering idiot through the neck.

Blood splattered across Ardee West's face. She clapped her hands in delight, looking at Glokta with shining eyes.

Luthar seemed surprised to be killed. 'Hah. Quite so,' said Glokta with a smile. The Captain pitched over onto his face, blood pouring from his punctured throat. The crowd roared their appreciation and Glokta indulged them with a deep, graceful bow. The cheering was redoubled.

'Oh, Colonel, you shouldn't,' murmured Ardee as Glokta licked the blood from her cheek.

'Shouldn't what?' he growled, tipping her back in his arms and kissing her fiercely. The crowd were in a frenzy. She gasped as he broke away, looking up at him adoringly with those big dark eyes of hers, lips slightly parted.

'The Arth Ector want you,' she said with a comely smile.

'What?' The crowd had fallen silent, damn them, and his left side was turning numb.

Ardee touched him tenderly on the cheek. 'The Arth Ector!' she shouted.

There was a heavy knock at the door. Glokta's eyes flicked open.

Where am I? Who am I?

Oh no.

Oh yes. He realised straight away he had been sleeping badly, his body was twisted round under the blankets, his face pushed into the pillow. His whole left side was dead.

The beating on the door came heavier than before. 'The Arth Ector!' came Frost's tongueless bellow from the other side.

Pain shot through Glokta's neck as he tried to raise his head from the pillow. *Ah, there's nothing like the first spasm of the day to get the mind working.* 'Alright!' he croaked, 'give me a minute, damn it!'

The albino's heavy footsteps thudded away down the corridor. Glokta lay still for a moment, then cautiously moved his right arm, ever so slowly, breath rasping with the effort, and tried to twist himself onto his back. He clenched his fist as the needling started in his left leg. *If only the damn thing would stay numb.* But the pain was coming on fast now. He was also becoming aware of an unpleasant smell. *Damn it. I've shit myself again.*

'Barnam!' howled Glokta, then waited, panting, left side throbbing with a

vengeance. *Where is the old idiot?* ‘Barnam!’ he screamed at the top of his lungs.

‘Are you alright, sir?’ came the servant’s voice from beyond the door.

Alright? Alright, you old fool? Just when do you think I was last alright? ‘No, damn it! I’ve soiled the bed!’

‘I’ve boiled water for a bath, sir. Can you get up?’

Once before Frost had had to break the door down. *Maybe I should let it stand open all night, but then how could I sleep?* ‘I think I can manage,’ Glokta hissed, tongue pressed into his empty gums, arms trembling as he hauled himself out of the bed and onto the chair beside it.

His grotesque, toeless left leg twitched to itself, still beyond his control. He glared down at it with a burning hatred. *Fucking horrible thing. Revolting, useless lump of flesh. Why didn’t they just cut you off? Why don’t I still?* But he knew why not. With his leg still on he could at least pretend to be half a man. He punched his withered thigh, then immediately regretted it. *Stupid, stupid.* The pain crept up his back, a little more intense than before, and growing with every second. *Come now, come now, let’s not fight.* He started to rub gently at the wasted flesh. *We are stuck with each other, so why torment me?*

‘Can you get to the door, sir?’ Glokta wrinkled his nose at the smell then took hold of his cane and slowly, agonisingly, pushed himself to his feet. He hobbled across the room, almost slipping halfway there but righting himself with a searing twinge. He turned the key in the lock, leaning against the wall for balance, and hauled the door open.

Barnam was standing on the other side, his arms outstretched, ready to catch him. *The ignominy of it. To think that I, Sand dan Glokta, the greatest swordsman the Union has ever seen, must be carried to my bath by an old man so that I can wash my own shit off. They must be laughing loud now, all those fools I beat, if they still remember me. I’d be laughing too, if it didn’t hurt so much.* But he let the weight off his left leg and put his arm round Barnam’s shoulders without complaint. *What’s the use after all? Might as well make it easy for myself. As easy as it can be.*

Glokta took a deep breath. ‘Go gently, the leg hasn’t woken up yet.’ They hopped and stumbled down the corridor, slightly too narrow for both of them together. The bathroom seemed a mile away. *Or more. I’d rather walk a hundred miles as I used to be, than to the bathroom as I am. But that’s my bad luck isn’t it? You can’t go back. Not ever.*

The steam felt deliciously warm on Glokta’s clammy skin. With Barnam holding him under the arms he slowly lifted his right leg and put it gingerly into the water. *Damn it, that’s hot.* The old servant helped him get the other leg in, then, taking him under the armpits, lowered him like a child, until he was immersed up to his neck.

‘Ahhh.’ Glokta cracked a toothless smile. ‘Hot as the Maker’s forge, Barnam, just the way I like it.’ The heat was getting into the leg now, and the pain was subsiding. *Not gone. Never gone. But better. A lot better.* Glokta began to feel almost as if he could face another day. *You have to learn to love the small things in life, like a hot bath. You have to love the small things, when you’ve nothing else.*

Practical Frost was waiting for him downstairs in the tiny dining room, his bulk wedged into a low chair against the wall. Glokta sagged into the other

chair and caught a whiff from the steaming porridge bowl, wooden spoon sticking up at an angle without even touching the side. His stomach rumbled and his mouth began watering fiercely. *All the symptoms, in fact, of extreme nausea.*

‘Hurray!’ shouted Glokta. ‘Porridge again!’ He looked over at the motionless Practical. ‘Porridge and honey, better than money, everything’s funny, with porridge and honey!’

The pink eyes did not blink.

‘It’s a rhyme for children. My mother used to sing it to me. Never actually got me to eat this slop though. But now,’ and he dug the spoon in, ‘I can’t get enough of it.’

Frost stared back at him.

‘Healthy,’ said Glokta, forcing down a mouthful of sweet mush and spooning up another, ‘delicious,’ choking down some more, ‘and here’s the real clincher,’ he gagged slightly on the next swallow, ‘no chewing required.’ He shoved the mostly full bowl away and tossed the spoon after it. ‘Mmmmm,’ he hummed. ‘A good breakfast makes for a good day, don’t you find?’

It was like staring at a whitewashed wall, but without all the emotion.

‘So the Arch Lector wants me again, does he?’

The albino nodded.

‘And what might our illustrious leader desire with the likes of us, do you think?’

A shrug.

‘Hmmm.’ Glokta licked bits of porridge out of his empty gums. ‘Does he seem in a good mood, do you know?’

Another shrug.

‘Come, come, Practical Frost, don’t tell me everything at once, I can’t take it in.’

Silence. Barnam entered the room and cleared away the bowl. ‘Do you want anything else, sir?’

‘Absolutely. A big half-raw slab of meat and a nice crunchy apple.’ He looked over at Practical Frost. ‘I used to love apples when I was a child.’

How many times have I made that joke? Frost looked back impassively, there was no laughter there. Glokta turned to Barnam, and the old man gave a tired smile.

‘Oh well,’ sighed Glokta. ‘A man has to have hope doesn’t he?’

‘Of course sir,’ muttered the servant, heading for the door.

Does he?



The Arch Lector’s office was on the top floor of the House of Questions, and it was a long way up. Worse still, the corridors were busy with people. Practicals, clerks, Inquisitors, crawling like ants through a crumbling dung-hill. Whenever he felt their eyes on him Glokta would limp along, smiling, head held high. Whenever he felt himself alone he would pause and gasp, sweat and curse, and rub and slap the tenuous life back into his leg.

Why does it have to be so high? he asked himself as he shuffled up the dim halls and winding stairs of the labyrinthine building. By the time he reached the ante-chamber he was exhausted and blowing hard, left hand sore on the handle of his cane.

The Arch Lector's secretary examined him suspiciously from behind a big dark desk that took up half the room. There were some chairs placed opposite for people to get nervous waiting in, and two huge Practicals flanked the great double doors to the office, so still and grim as to appear a part of the furniture.

'Do you have an appointment?' demanded the secretary in a shrill voice. *You know who I am, you self-important little shit.*

'Of course,' snapped Glokta, 'do you think I limped all the way up here to admire your desk?'

The secretary looked down his nose at him. He was a pale, handsome young man with a mop of yellow hair. *The puffed up fifth son of some minor nobleman with over-active loins, and he thinks he can patronise me?* 'And your name is?' he asked with a sneer.

Glokta's patience was worn out by the climb. He smashed his cane down on the top of the desk and the secretary near jumped out of his chair. 'What are you? A fucking idiot? How many crippled Inquisitors do you have here?'

'Er . . .' said the secretary, mouth working nervously.

'Er? Er? Is that a number? Speak up!'

'Well I—'

'I'm Glokta, you dolt! Inquisitor Glokta!'

'Yes, sir, I—'

'Get your fat arse out of that chair, fool! Don't keep me waiting!' The secretary sprang up, hurried to the doors, pushed one open and stood aside respectfully. 'That's better,' growled Glokta, shuffling after him. He looked up at the Practicals as he hobbled past. He was almost sure one of them had a slight smile on his face.

The room had hardly changed since he was last there, six years before. It was a cavernous, round space, domed ceiling carved with gargoyle faces, its one enormous window offering a spectacular view over the spires of the University, a great section of the outer wall of the Agriont, and the looming outline of the House of the Maker beyond.

The chamber was mostly lined with shelves and cabinets, stacked high with neatly ordered files and papers. A few dark portraits peered down from the sparse white walls, including a huge one of the current King of the Union as a young man, looking wise and stern. *No doubt painted before he became a senile joke. These days there's usually a bit less authority and a bit more stray drool about him.* There was a heavy round table in the centre of the room, its surface painted with a map of the Union in exquisite detail. Every city in which there was a department of the Inquisition was marked with a precious stone, and a tiny silver replica of Adua rose out of the table at its hub.

The Arch Lector was sitting in an ancient high chair at this table, deep in conversation with another man: a gaunt, balding, sour-faced old fellow in dark robes. Sult beamed up as Glokta shuffled towards them, the other man's expression hardly changed.

'Why, Inquisitor Glokta, delighted you could join us. Do you know Surveyor General Halleck?'

'I have not had the pleasure,' said Glokta. *Not that it looks like much of a pleasure, though.* The old bureaucrat stood and shook Glokta's hand without enthusiasm.

'And this is one of my Inquisitors, Sand dan Glokta.'

'Yes indeed,' murmured Halleck. 'You used to be in the army, I believe. I saw you fence once.'

Glokta tapped his leg with his cane. 'That can't have been any time recently.'

'No.' There was a silence.

'The Surveyor General is likely soon to receive a most significant promotion,' said Sult. 'To a chair on the Closed Council itself.' *The Closed Council? Indeed? A most significant promotion.*

Halleck seemed less than delighted, however. 'I will consider it done when it is his Majesty's pleasure to invite me,' he snapped, 'and not before.'

Sult floated smoothly over this rocky ground. 'I am sure the Council feels that you are the only candidate worth recommending, now that Sepp dan Teufel is no longer being considered.' *Our old friend Teufel? No longer considered for what?*

Halleck frowned and shook his head. 'Teufel. I worked with the man for ten years. I never liked him,' *or anyone else, by the look of you,* 'but I would never have thought him a traitor.'

Sult shook his head sadly. 'We all feel it keenly, but here is his confession in black and white.' He held up the folded paper with a doleful frown. 'I fear the roots of corruption can run very deep. Who would know that better than I, whose sorry task it is to weed the garden?'

'Indeed, indeed,' muttered Halleck, nodding grimly. 'You deserve all of our thanks for that. You also, Inquisitor.'

'Oh no, not I,' said Glokta humbly. The three men looked at each other in a sham of mutual respect.

Halleck pushed back his chair. 'Well, taxes do not collect themselves. I must return to my work.'

'Enjoy your last few days in the job,' said Sult. 'I give you my word that the King will send for you soon!'

Halleck allowed himself the thinnest of smiles, then nodded stiffly to them and stalked away. The secretary ushered him out and pulled the heavy door shut. There was silence. *But I'm damned if I'll be the one to break it.*

'I expect you're wondering what this was all about, eh, Glokta?'

'The thought had crossed my mind, your Eminence.'

'I bet it had.' Sult swept from his chair and strode across to the window, his white-gloved hands clasped behind his back. 'The world changes, Glokta, the world changes. The old order crumbles. Loyalty, duty, pride, honour. Notions that have fallen far from fashion. What has replaced them?' He glanced over his shoulder for a moment, and his lip curled. 'Greed. Merchants have become the new power in the land. Bankers, shopkeepers, salesmen. Little men, with little minds and little ambitions. Men whose only loyalty is to themselves, whose only duty is to their own purses, whose only pride is in swindling their

bettors, whose only honour is weighed out in silver coin.' *No need to ask where you stand on the merchant class.*

Sult scowled out at the view, then turned back into the room. 'Now it seems anyone's son can get an education, and a business, and become rich. The merchant guilds: the Mercers, the Spicers and their like, grow steadily in wealth and influence. Jumped-up, posturing commoners dictating to their natural betters. Their fat and greedy fingers, fumbling at the strings of power. It is almost too much to stand.' He gave a shudder as he paced across the floor.

'I will speak honestly with you, Inquisitor.' The Arch Lector waved his graceful hand as though his honesty were a priceless gift. 'The Union has never seemed more powerful, has never controlled more land, but beneath the façade we are weak. It is hardly a secret that the King has become entirely unable to make his own decisions. Crown Prince Ladisla is a fop, surrounded by flatterers and fools, caring for nothing but gambling and clothes. Prince Raynault is far better fitted to rule, but he is the younger brother. The Closed Council, whose task it should be to steer this leaking vessel, is packed with frauds and schemers. Some may be loyal, some are definitely not, each intent on pulling the King his own way.' *How frustrating, when I suppose they should all be pulling him in yours?*

'Meanwhile, the Union is beset with enemies, dangers outside our borders, and dangers within. Gurkhul has a new and vigorous Emperor, fitting his country for another war. The Northmen are up in arms as well, skulking on the borders of Angland. In the Open Council the noblemen clamour for ancient rights, while in the villages the peasants clamour for new ones.' He gave a deep sigh. 'Yes, the old order crumbles, and no one has the heart or the stomach to support it.'

Sult paused, staring up at one of the portraits: a hefty, bald man dressed all in white. Glokta recognised him well enough. *Zoller, the greatest of all Arch Lectors. Tireless champion of the Inquisition, hero to the torturer, scourge of the disloyal.* He glared down balefully from the wall, as though even beyond death he could burn traitors with a glance.

'Zoller,' growled Sult. 'Things were different in his day, I can tell you. No whinging peasants then, no swindling merchants, no sulking noblemen. If men forgot their place they were reminded with hot iron, and any carping judge who dared to whine about it was never heard from again. The Inquisition was a noble institution, filled with the best and the brightest. To serve their King and to root out disloyalty were their only desires, and their only rewards.' *Oh, things were grand in the old days.*

The Arch Lector slid back into his seat and leaned forward across the table. 'Now we have become a place where third sons of impoverished noblemen can line their pockets with bribes, or where near-criminal scum can indulge a passion for torture. Our influence with the King has been steadily eroded, our budgets have been steadily cut. Once we were feared and respected, Glokta, but now . . .' *We're a miserable sham.* Sult frowned, 'Well, less so. Intrigues and treasons abound, and I fear that the Inquisition is no longer equal to its task. Too many of the Superiors can no longer be trusted. They are no longer concerned with the interests of the King, or of the state, or of anybody's

interests beyond their own.' *The Superiors? Not to be trusted? I swoon with the shock.* Sult's frown grew still deeper. 'And now Feekt is dead.'

Glokta looked up. *Now that is news.* 'The Lord Chancellor?'

'It will become public knowledge tomorrow morning. He died suddenly a few nights ago, while you were busy with your friend Rewes. There are still some questions surrounding his death, but the man was nearly ninety. The surprise is that he lasted this long. The golden Chancellor they called him, the greatest politician of his day. Even now they are setting his likeness in stone, for a statue on the Kingsway.' Sult snorted to himself. 'The greatest gift that any of us can hope for.'

The Arch Lector's eyes narrowed to blue slits. 'If you have any childish notions that the Union is controlled by its King, or by those prating blue-blood fools on the Open Council, you can let them wilt now. The Closed Council is where the power lies. More than ever since the King's illness. Twelve men, in twelve big, uncomfortable chairs, myself among them. Twelve men with very different ideas, and for twenty years, war and peace, Feekt held us in balance. He played off the Inquisition against the judges, the bankers against the military. He was the axle on which the Kingdom turned, the foundation on which it rested, and his death has left a hole. All kinds of gaping holes, and people will be rushing to fill them. I have a feeling that whining ass Marovia, that bleeding heart of a High Justice, that self-appointed champion of the common man, will be first in the queue. It is a fluid, and a dangerous, situation.' The Arch Lector planted his fists firmly on the table before him. 'We must ensure that the wrong people do not take advantage of it.'

Glokta nodded. *I think I take your meaning, Arch Lector. We must ensure that it is we who take advantage, and no one else.*

'It need hardly be said that the post of Lord Chancellor is one of the most powerful in the realm. The gathering of taxes, the treasury, the King's mints, all come under his auspices. Money, Glokta, money. And money is power, I need hardly tell you. A new Chancellor will be appointed tomorrow. The foremost candidate was our erstwhile Master of the Mints, Sepp dan Teufel.' *I see. Something tells me he will no longer be under consideration.*

Sult's lip curled. 'Teufel was closely linked with the merchant guilds, and the Mercers in particular.' His sneer became a scowl. 'In addition to which he was an associate of High Justice Marovia. So, you see, he would hardly have made a suitable Lord Chancellor.' *No indeed. Hardly suitable.* 'Surveyor General Halleck is a far better choice, in my opinion.'

Glokta looked towards the door. 'Him? Lord Chancellor?' Sult got up smiling and moved over to a cabinet against the wall. 'There really is no one else. Everyone hates him, and he hates everyone, except me. Furthermore, he is a hard-nosed conservative, who despises the merchant class and everything they stand for.' He opened the cabinet and took out two glasses and an ornate decanter. 'If not exactly a friendly face on the Council, he will at least be a sympathetic one, and damned hostile toward everyone else. I can hardly think of a more suitable candidate.'

Glokta nodded. 'He seems honest.' *But not so honest that I'd trust him to put me in the bath. Would you, your Eminence?*

'Yes,' said Sult, 'he will be very valuable to us.' He poured out two glasses of

rich red wine. 'And just as a bonus, I was able to arrange for a sympathetic new Master of the Mints as well. I hear that the Mercers are absolutely biting their tongues off with fury. Marovia's none too happy either, the bastard.' Sult chuckled to himself. 'All good news, and we have you to thank.' He held out one of the glasses.

Poison? A slow death twitching and puking on the Arch Lector's lovely mosaic floor? Or just pitching onto my face on his table? But there was really no option but to grasp the glass and take a hearty swig. The wine was unfamiliar but delicious. *Probably from somewhere very beautiful and far away. At least if I die up here I won't have to make it back down all those steps.* But the Arch Lector was drinking too, all smiles and good grace. *So I suppose I will last out the afternoon, after all.*

'Yes, we have made a good first step. These are dangerous times alright, and yet danger and opportunity often walk hand in hand.' Glokta felt a strange sensation creeping up his back. *Is that fear, or ambition, or both?* 'I need someone to help me put matters in order. Someone who does not fear the Superiors, or the merchants, or even the Closed Council. Someone who can be relied upon to act with subtlety, and discretion, and ruthlessness. Someone whose loyalty to the Union is beyond question, but who has no friends within the government.' *Someone who's hated by everyone? Someone to take the fall if things turn sour? Someone who will have few mourners at their funeral?*

'I have need of an Inquisitor Exempt, Glokta. Someone to operate beyond the Superiors' control, but with my full authority. Someone answerable only to me.' The Arch Lector raised an eyebrow, as though the thought had only just come to him. 'It strikes me that you are exceptionally well suited to this task. What do you think?'

I think the holder of such a post would have a great many enemies and only one friend. Glokta peered up at the Arch Lector. *And that friend might not be so very reliable. I think the holder of such a post might not last long.* 'Could I have some time to consider it?'

'No.'

Danger and opportunity often walk hand in hand . . . 'Then I accept.'

'Excellent. I do believe this is the start of a long and productive relationship.' Sult smiled at him over the rim of his glass. 'You know, Glokta, of all the merchants grubbing away out there, it is the Mercers I find the most unpalatable. It was largely through their influence that Westport entered the Union, and it was because of Westport's money that we won the Gurkish war. The King rewarded them, of course, with priceless trading rights, but ever since then their arrogance has been insufferable. Anyone would have thought they fought the battles themselves, for the airs they have put on, and the liberties they have taken. The honourable Guild of Mercers,' he sneered. 'It occurs to me, now that your friend Rews has given us the means to hook them in so deeply, it would be a shame to let them wriggle free.'

Glokta was much surprised, though he thought he hid it well. *To go further? Why? The Mercers wriggle free and they keep on paying, and that keeps all kinds of people happy. As things are, they're scared and soft – wondering who Rews named, who might be next in the chair. If we go further they may be hurt, or finished entirely. Then they'll stop paying, and a lot of people will be unhappy. Some of*

them in this very building. ‘I can easily continue my investigations, your Eminence, if you would like me to.’ Glokta took another sip. It really was an excellent wine.

‘We must be cautious. Cautious and very thorough. The Mercers’ money flows like milk. They have many friends, even amongst the highest circles of the nobility. Brock, Heugen, Isher, and plenty more besides. Some of the very greatest men in the land. They’ve all been known to suck at that tit, one time or another, and babies will cry when their milk is snatched away.’ A cruel grin flickered across Sult’s face. ‘But still, if children are to learn discipline, they must sometimes be made to weep . . . who did that worm Rews name in his confession?’

Glokta leaned forward painfully and slid Rews’ paper of confession toward him, unfolded it and scanned the list of names from bottom to top.

‘Sepp dan Teufel, we all know.’

‘Oh, we know and love him, Inquisitor,’ said Sult, beaming down, ‘but I feel we may safely cross him off the list. Who else?’

‘Well, let’s see,’ Glokta took a leisurely look back at the paper. ‘There’s Harod Polst, a Mercer.’ *A nobody.*

Sult waved his hand impatiently. ‘He’s nobody.’

‘Solimo Scandi, a Mercer from Westport.’ *Also nobody.*

‘No, no, Glokta, we can do better than Solimo what’s-his-name can’t we? These little Mercers are of no real interest. Pull up the root, and the leaves die by themselves.’

‘Quite so, Arch Lector. We have Villem dan Robb, minor nobility, holds a junior customs post.’ Sult looked thoughtful, shook his head. ‘Then there’s—’

‘Wait! Villem dan Robb . . .’ The Arch Lector snapped his fingers, ‘His brother Kiral is one of the Queen’s gentlemen. He snubbed me at a social gathering.’ Sult smiled. ‘Yes, Villem dan Robb, bring him in.’

And so we go deeper. ‘I serve and obey, your Eminence. Is there anyone’s name in particular that need be mentioned?’ Glokta set down his empty glass.

‘No.’ The Arch Lector turned away and waved his hand again. ‘Any of ’em, all of ’em. I don’t care.’

First of the Magi

The lake stretched away, fringed by steep rocks and dripping greenery, surface pricked by the rain, flat and grey as far as the eye could see. Logen's eye couldn't see too far in this weather, it had to be said. The opposite shore could have been a hundred strides away, but the calm waters looked deep. Very deep.

Logen had long ago given up any attempt at staying dry, and the water ran through his hair and down his face, dripped from his nose, his fingers, his chin. Being wet, tired, and hungry had become a part of life. It often had been, come to think on it. He closed his eyes and felt the rain patter against his skin, heard the water lapping on the shingle. He knelt by the lake, pulled the stopper from his flask and pushed it under the surface, watched the bubbles break as it filled up.

Malacus Quai stumbled out of the bushes, breathing fast and shallow. He sank down to his knees, crawled against the roots of a tree, coughed out phlegm onto the pebbles. His coughing sounded bad now. It came right up from his guts and made his whole rib cage rattle. He was even paler than he had been when they first met, and a lot thinner. Logen was somewhat thinner too. These were lean times, all in all. He walked over to the haggard apprentice and squatted down.

'Just give me a moment.' Quai closed his sunken eyes and tipped his head back. 'Just a moment.' His mouth hung open, the tendons in his scrawny neck standing out. He looked like a corpse already.

'Don't rest too long. You might never get up.'

Logen held out the flask. Quai didn't even lift his arm to take it, so Logen put it against his lips and tipped it up a little. He took a wincing swallow, coughed, then his head dropped back against the tree like a stone.

'Do you know where we are?' asked Logen.

The apprentice blinked out at the water as though he'd only just noticed it. 'This must be the north end of the lake . . . there should be a track.' His voice had sunk to a whisper. 'At the southern end there's a road with two stones.' He gave a sudden violent cough, swallowed with difficulty. 'Follow the road over the bridge and you're there,' he croaked.

Logen looked off along the beach at the dripping trees. 'How far is it?' No answer. He took hold of the sick man's bony shoulder and shook it. Quai's eyelids flickered open, he stared up blearily, trying to focus. 'How far?'

'Forty miles.'

Logen sucked his teeth. Quai wouldn't be walking forty miles. He'd be lucky to make forty strides on his own. He knew it well enough, you could see it in his eyes. He'd be dead soon, Logen reckoned, a few days at the most. He'd seen stronger men die of a fever.

Forty miles. Logen thought about it carefully, rubbing his chin with his

thumb. Forty miles.

'Shit,' he whispered.

He dragged the pack over and pulled it open. They had some food left, but not much. A few shreds of tough dried meat, a heel of mouldy black bread. He looked out over the lake, so peaceful. They wouldn't be running out of drinking water any time soon at least. He pulled his heavy cookpot out of his pack and set it down on the shingle. They'd been together a long time, but there was nothing left to cook. You can't become attached to things, not out here in the wild. He tossed the rope away into the bushes, then threw the lightened pack over his shoulder.

Quai's eyes had closed again, and he was scarcely breathing. Logen still remembered the first time he had to leave someone behind, remembered it like it was yesterday. Strange how the boy's name had gone but the face was with him still.

The Shanka had taken a piece out of his thigh. A big piece. He'd moaned all the way, he couldn't walk. The wound was going bad, he was dying anyway. They had to leave him. No one had blamed Logen for it. The boy had been too young, he should never have gone. Bad luck was all, could happen to anyone. He'd cried after them as they made their way down the hillside in a grim, silent group, heads down. Logen seemed to hear the cries even when they'd left him far behind. He could still hear them.

In the wars it had been different. Men dropped from the columns all the time on the long marches, in the cold months. First they fell to the back, then they fell behind, then they fell over. The cold, the sick, the wounded. Logen shivered and hunched his shoulders. At first he'd tried to help them. Then he became grateful he wasn't one of them. Then he stepped over the corpses and hardly noticed them. You learn to tell when someone isn't getting up again. He looked at Malacus Quai. One more death in the wild was nothing to remark upon. You have to be realistic, after all.

The apprentice started from his fitful sleep and tried to push himself up. His hands were shaking bad. He looked up at Logen, eyes glittering bright. 'I can't get up,' he croaked.

'I know. I'm surprised you made it this far.' It didn't matter so much now. Logen knew the way. If he could find that track he might make twenty miles a day.

'If you leave me some of the food . . . perhaps . . . after you get to the library . . . someone . . .'

'No,' said Logen, setting his jaw. 'I need the food.'

Quai made a strange sound, somewhere between a cough and a sob.

Logen leaned down and set his right shoulder in Quai's stomach, pushed his arm under his back. 'I can't carry you forty miles without it,' and he straightened up, hauling the apprentice over his shoulder. He set off down the shore, holding Quai in place by his jacket, his boots crunching into the wet shingle. The apprentice didn't even move, just hung there like a sack of wet rags, his limp arms knocking against the backs of Logen's legs.

When he'd made it thirty strides or so Logen turned around and looked back. The pot was sitting forlorn by the lake, already filling up with rainwater. They'd been through a lot together, him and that pot.

'Fare you well, old friend.'

The pot did not reply.

Logen set his shivering burden gently down at the side of the road and stretched his aching back, scratched at the dirty bandage on his arm, took a drink of water from his flask. Water was the only thing to have passed his sore lips that day, and the hunger was gnawing at his guts. At least it had stopped raining. You have to learn to love the small things in life, like dry boots. You have to love the small things, when you've nothing else.

Logen spat in the dirt and rubbed the life back into his fingers. There was no missing the place, that was sure. The two stones towered over the road, ancient and pitted, patched with green moss at the base and grey lichen higher up. They were covered in faded carvings, lines of letters in a script Logen couldn't understand, didn't even recognise. There was a forbidding feel about them though, a sense more of warning than welcome.

'The First Law ...'

'What?' said Logen, surprised. Quai had been in an unpleasant place between sleep and waking ever since they left the pot behind two days before. The pot could have made more meaningful sounds in that time. That morning Logen had woken to find him scarcely breathing. He'd been sure that he was dead, to begin with, but the man was still clinging weakly to life. He didn't give up easy, you had to give him that.

Logen knelt down and shoved the wet hair out of Quai's face. The apprentice suddenly grabbed his wrist and started forward.

'It's forbidden,' he whispered, staring at Logen with wide eyes, 'to touch the Other Side!'

'Eh?'

'To speak with devils,' he croaked, grabbing hold of Logen's battered coat. 'The creatures of the world below are made of lies! You mustn't do it!'

'I won't,' muttered Logen, wondering if he'd ever know what the apprentice was talking about. 'I won't. For what that's worth.'

It wasn't worth much. Quai had already dropped back into his twitching half-sleep. Logen chewed at his lip. He hoped the apprentice would wake again, but he didn't think it likely. Still, perhaps this Bayaz would be able to do something, he was the First of the Magi after all, great in high wisdom and so on. So Logen hefted Quai up onto his shoulder again and trudged between the ancient stones.

The road climbed steep into the rocks above the lake, here built up, there cut deep into the stony ground. It was worn and pitted with age, pocked with weeds. It switched back on itself again and again, and soon Logen was panting and sweating, his legs burning with the effort. His pace began to slow.

The fact was, he was getting tired. Not just tired from the climb, or from the back-breaking slog he'd walked that day with a half-dead apprentice over his shoulder, or from the slog the day before, or even from the fight in the woods. He was tired of everything. Of the Shanka, of the wars, of his whole life.

'I can't walk for ever, Malacus, I can't fight for ever. How much of this horrible shit should a man have to take? I need to sit down a minute. In a proper fucking chair! Is that too much to ask? Is it?' In this frame of mind, cursing and grumbling at every step, and with Quai's head knocking against

his arse, Logen came to the bridge.

It was as ancient as the road, coated with creepers, simple and slender, arching maybe twenty strides across a dizzying gorge. Far below a river surged over jagged rocks, filling the air with noise and shining spray. On the far side a high wall had been built between towering faces of mossy stone, made with such care it was difficult to say where the natural cliff ended and the man-made one began. A single ancient door was set into it, faced with beaten copper, turned streaky green by the wet and the years.

As Logen picked his way carefully across the slippery stone he found himself wondering, through force of habit, how you could storm this place. You couldn't. Not with a thousand picked men. There was only a narrow shelf of rock before the door, no room to set a ladder or swing a ram. The wall was ten strides high at least, and the gate had a dreadful solid look. And if the defenders were to bring down the bridge . . . Logen peered over the edge, and swallowed. It was a long way down.

He took a deep breath and thumped on the damp green copper with his fist. Four big, booming knocks. He'd beat on the gates of Carleon like that, after the battle, and its people had rushed to surrender. No one rushed to do anything now.

He waited. He knocked again. He waited. He became wetter and wetter in the mist from the river. He ground his teeth. He raised his arm to knock again. A narrow hatch snapped open, and a pair of rheumy eyes stared at him coldly from between thick bars.

'Who's this now?' snapped a gruff voice.

'Logen Ninefingers is my name. I've—'

'Never heard of you.'

Hardly the welcome Logen had been hoping for. 'I've come to see Bayaz.' No reply. 'The First of the—'

'Yes. He's here.' But the door didn't open. 'He isn't taking visitors. I told that to the last messenger.'

'I'm no messenger, I have Malacus Quai with me.'

'Malaca what?'

'Quai, the apprentice.'

'Apprentice?'

'He's very ill,' said Logen slowly. 'He may die.'

'Ill, you say? Die, was it?'

'Yes.'

'And what was your name again—'

'Just open the fucking door!' Logen shook his fist pointlessly at the slot. 'Please.'

'We don't let just anyone in . . . hold up. Show me your hands.'

'What?'

'Your hands.' Logen held his hands up. The watery eyes moved slowly across his fingers. 'There are nine. There's one missing, see?' He shoved the stump at the hatch.

'Nine, is it? You should have said.'

Bolts clanked and the door creaked slowly open. An elderly man, bent under an old-fashioned suit of armour, was staring at him suspiciously from the

other side. He was holding a long sword much too heavy for him. Its point wobbled around wildly as he strained to keep it upright.

Logen held up his hands. 'I surrender.'

The ancient gatekeeper was not amused. He grunted sourly as Logen stepped past him, then he wrestled the door shut and fumbled with the bolts, turned and trudged away without another word. Logen followed him up a narrow valley lined with strange houses, weathered and mossy, half dug into the steep rocks, merging with the mountainside.

A dour-faced woman was working at a spinning wheel on a doorstep, and she frowned at Logen as he walked past with the unconscious apprentice over his shoulder. Logen smiled back at her. She was no beauty, that was sure, but it had been a very long time. The woman ducked into her house and kicked the door shut, leaving the wheel spinning. Logen sighed. The old magic was still there.

The next house was a bakery with a squat, smoking chimney. The smell of baking bread made Logen's empty stomach rumble. Further on, a couple of dark-haired children were laughing and playing, running round a scrubby old tree. They reminded Logen of his own children. They didn't look anything like them, but he was in a morbid frame of mind.

He had to admit to being a little disappointed. He'd been expecting something cleverer-looking, and a lot more beards. These folk didn't seem so very wise. They looked just like any other peasants. Not unlike his own village had looked before the Shanka came. He wondered if he was in the right place. Then they rounded a bend in the road.

Three great, tapering towers were built into the mountainside ahead, joined at their bases but separating higher up, covered in dark ivy. They seemed far older even than the ancient bridge and road, as old as the mountain itself. A jumbled mess of other buildings crowded around their feet, straggling around the sides of a wide courtyard in which people were busy with everyday chores. A thin woman was churning some milk on a stoop. A stocky blacksmith was trying to shoe a restless mare. An old, bald butcher in a stained apron had finished chopping up some animal and was washing his bloody forearms in a trough.

And on a set of wide steps before the tallest of the three towers sat a magnificent old man. He was dressed all in white, with a long beard, a hook nose, and white hair spilling from under a white skull-cap. Logen was impressed, finally. The First of the Magi surely looked the part. As Logen shuffled towards him he started up from the steps and hurried over, white coat flapping behind him.

'Set him down here,' he muttered, indicating a patch of grass by the well, and Logen knelt and dumped Quai on the ground, as gently as he could with his back aching so much. The old man bent over him, laid a gnarled hand on his forehead.

'I brought your apprentice back,' muttered Logen pointlessly.

'Mine?'

'Aren't you Bayaz?'

The old man laughed. 'Oh no, I am Wells, head servant here at the Library.'

'I am Bayaz,' came a voice from behind. The butcher was walking slowly

toward them, wiping his hands on a cloth. He looked maybe sixty but heavily built, with a strong face, deeply lined, and a close-cropped grey beard around his mouth. He was entirely bald, and the afternoon sun shone brightly off his tanned pate. He was neither handsome nor majestic, but as he came closer there did seem to be something about him. An assurance, an air of command. A man used to giving orders, and to being obeyed.

The First of the Magi took Logen's left hand in both of his and pressed it warmly. Then he turned it over and examined the stump of his missing finger.

'Logen Ninefingers, then. The one they call the Bloody-Nine. I have heard stories about you, even shut up here in my library.'

Logen winced. He could guess what sort of stories the old man might have heard. 'That was a long time ago.'

'Of course. We all have a past, eh? I make no judgements on hearsay.' And Bayaz smiled. A broad, white, beaming smile. His face lit up with friendly creases, but a hardness lingered around his eyes, deep-set and glistening green. A stony hardness. Logen grinned back, but he reckoned already that he wouldn't want to make an enemy of this man.

'And you have brought our missing lamb back to the fold.' Bayaz frowned down at Malacus Quai, motionless on the grass. 'How is he?'

'I think he will live, sir,' said Wells, 'but we should get him out of the cold.'

The First of the Magi snapped his fingers and a sharp crack echoed from the buildings. 'Help him.' The smith hurried forward and took Quai's feet, and together he and Wells carried the apprentice through the tall door into the library.

'Now, Master Ninefingers, I have called and you have answered, and that shows good manners. Manners might be out of fashion in the North, but I want you to know that I appreciate them. Courtesy should be answered with courtesy, I have always thought. But what's this now?' The old gatekeeper was hurrying back across the yard, greatly out of breath. 'Two visitors in one day? Whatever next?'

'Master Bayaz!' wheezed the gatekeeper, 'there's riders at the gate, well horsed and well armed! They say they've an urgent message from the King of the Northmen!'

Bethod. It had to be. The spirits had said he had given himself a golden hat, and who else would have dared to call himself King of the Northmen? Logen swallowed. He'd got away from their last meeting with his life and nothing else, and yet it was better than many had managed, far better.

'Well, master?' asked the gatekeeper, 'shall I tell them to be off?'

'Who leads them?'

'A fancy lad with a sour face. Said he's this King's son or something.'

'Was it Calder or Scale? They're both something sour.'

'The younger one, I reckon.'

Calder then, that was something. Either one was bad, but Scale was much the worse. Both together were an experience to be avoided. Bayaz seemed to consider a moment. 'Prince Calder may enter, but his men must remain beyond the bridge.'

'Yes sir, beyond the bridge.' The gatekeeper wheezed away. He'd love that, would Calder. Logen was greatly tickled by the thought of the so-called Prince

screaming uselessly through that little slot.

'The King of the Northmen now, can you imagine?' Bayaz stared absently off down the valley. 'I knew Bethod when he was not so grand. And so did you, eh, Master Ninefingers?'

Logen frowned. He'd known Bethod when he was next to nothing, a little chieftain like so many others. Logen had come for help against the Shanka, and Bethod had given it, at a price. Back then, the price had seemed light, and well worth the paying. Just to fight. To kill a few men. Logen had always found killing easy, and Bethod had seemed a man well worth fighting for – bold, proud, ruthless, venomously ambitious. All qualities that Logen had admired, back then, all qualities he thought he had himself. But time had changed them both, and the price had risen.

'He used to be a better man,' Bayaz was musing, 'but crowns sit badly on some people. Do you know his sons?'

'Better than I'd like.'

Bayaz nodded. 'They're absolute shit, aren't they? And I fear now they will never improve. Imagine that pin-head Scale a king. Ugh!' The wizard shuddered. 'It almost makes you want to wish his father a long life. Almost, but not quite.'

The little girl that Logen had seen playing scurried over. She had a chain of yellow flowers in her hands, and she held it up to the old wizard. 'I made this,' she said. Logen could hear the rapid pounding of hooves coming up the road.

'For me? How perfectly charming.' Bayaz took the flowers from her. 'Excellent work, my dear. The Master Maker himself could not have done better.'

The rider clattered out into the yard, pulled his horse up savagely and swung from the saddle. Calder. The years had been kinder to him than to Logen, that much was clear. He was dressed all in fine blacks trimmed with dark fur. A big red jewel flashed on his finger, the hilt of his sword was set with gold. He'd grown and filled out, half the size of his brother Scale, but a big man still. His pale, proud face was pretty much as Logen remembered though, thin lips twisted in a permanent sneer.

He threw his reins at the woman churning milk then strode briskly across the yard, glowering about him, his long hair flapping in the breeze. When he was about ten strides away he saw Logen. His jaw dropped. Calder took a shocked half step back and his hand twitched towards his sword. Then he smiled a cold little smile.

'So you've taken to keeping dogs have you, Bayaz? I'd watch this one. He's been known to bite his master's hand.' His lip curled further. 'I could put him down for you if you'd like.'

Logen shrugged. Hard words are for fools and cowards. Calder might have been both, but Logen was neither. If you mean to kill, you're better getting right to it than talking about it. Talk only makes the other man ready, and that's the last thing you want. So Logen said nothing. Calder could take that for weakness if he pleased, and so much the better. Fights might find Logen depressingly often, but he was long, long past looking for them.

Bethod's second son turned his contempt on the First of the Magi. 'My father will be displeased, Bayaz! That my men must wait outside the gate shows little

respect!’

‘But I have so little, Prince Calder,’ said the wizard calmly. ‘Please don’t be downhearted, though. Your last messenger wasn’t allowed over the bridge, so you see we’re making progress.’

Calder scowled. ‘Why have you not answered my father’s summons?’

‘There are so many demands on my time.’ Bayaz held up the chain of flowers. ‘These don’t make themselves, you know.’

The Prince was not amused. ‘My father,’ he boomed, ‘Bethod, King of the Northmen, commands you to attend upon him at Carleon!’ He cleared his throat. ‘He will not . . .’ He coughed.

‘What?’ demanded Bayaz. ‘Speak up, child!’

‘He commands . . .’ The Prince coughed again, spluttered, choked. He put a hand to his throat. The air seemed to have become very still.

‘Commands, does he?’ Bayaz frowned. ‘Bring great Juvens back from the land of the dead. He may command me. He alone, and no other.’ The frown grew deeper still, and Logen had to resist a strange desire to back away. ‘You may not. Nor may your father, whatever he calls himself.’

Calder sank slowly to his knees, face twisted, eyes watering. Bayaz looked him up and down. ‘What solemn attire, did somebody die? Here,’ and he tossed the chain of flowers over the Prince’s head. ‘A little colour may lighten your mood. Tell your father he must come himself. I do not waste my time on fools and younger sons. I am old fashioned in this. I like to talk to the horse’s head, not the horse’s arse. Do you understand me, boy?’ Calder was sagging sideways, eyes red and bulging. The First of the Magi waved his hand. ‘You may go.’

The Prince heaved in a ragged breath, coughed and reeled to his feet, stumbled for his horse and hauled himself up into the saddle with a deal less grace than he had got down. He shot a murderous glance over his shoulder as he made for the gate, but it didn’t have quite the same weight with his face red as a slapped arse. Logen realised he was grinning, wide. It was a long time since he’d enjoyed himself this much.

‘I understand that you can speak to the spirits.’

Logen was caught off guard. ‘Eh?’

‘To speak to the spirits.’ Bayaz shook his head. ‘It is a rare gift in these times. How are they?’

‘What, the spirits?’

‘Yes.’

‘Dwindling.’

‘Soon they will all sleep, eh? The magic leaks out of the world. That is the set order of things. Over the years my knowledge has grown, and yet my power has diminished.’

‘Calder seemed impressed.’

‘Bah.’ Bayaz waved his hand. ‘A mere nothing. A little trick of air and flesh, easily done. No, believe me, the magic ebbs away. It is a fact. A natural law. Still, there are many ways to crack an egg, eh, my friend? If one tool fails then we must try another.’ Logen was no longer entirely sure what they were talking about, but he was too tired to ask.

‘Yes, indeed,’ murmured the First of the Magi. ‘There are many ways to

crack an egg. Speaking of which, you look hungry.'

Logen's mouth flooded with spit at the very mention of food. 'Yes,' he mumbled. 'Yes . . . I could eat.'

'Of course.' Bayaz clapped him warmly on the shoulder. 'And then perhaps a bath? Not that we are offended of course, but I find that there is nothing more soothing than hot water after a long walk, and you, I suspect, have had a very long walk indeed. Come with me, Master Ninefingers, you're safe here.'

Food. Bath. Safety. Logen had to stop himself from weeping as he followed the old man into the library.

The Good Man

It was a hot, hot day outside, and the sun shone brightly through the many-paned windows, casting criss-cross patterns on the wooden floor of the audience chamber. It was mid-afternoon, and the room was soupy warm and stuffy as a kitchen.

Fortis dan Hoff, the Lord Chamberlain, was red-faced and sweaty in his fur-trimmed robes of state, and had been in an increasingly filthy mood all afternoon. Harlen Morrow, his Under-Secretary for Audiences, looked even more uncomfortable, but then he had his terror of Hoff to contend with, in addition to the heat. Both men seemed greatly distressed in their own ways, but at least they got to sit down.

Major West was sweating steadily into his embroidered dress uniform. He had been standing in the same position, hands behind his back, teeth gritted, for nearly two hours while Lord Hoff sulked and grumbled and bellowed his way through the applicants and anyone else in view. West fervently wished, and not for the first time that afternoon, that he was lying under a tree in the park, with a strong drink. Or perhaps under a glacier, entombed within the ice. Anywhere but here.

Standing guard on these horrible audiences was hardly one of West's more pleasant duties, but it could have been worse. You had to spare a thought for the eight soldiers stood around the walls: they were in full armour. West was waiting for one of them to pass out and crash to the floor with a sound like a cupboard full of saucepans, no doubt to the great disgust of the Lord Chamberlain, but so far they were all somehow staying upright.

'Why is this damned room always the wrong temperature?' Hoff was demanding to know, as if the heat was an insult directed solely at him. 'It's too hot half the year, too cold the other half! There's no air in here, no air at all! Why don't these windows open? Why can't we have a bigger room?'

'Er . . .' mumbled the harassed Under-Secretary, pushing his spectacles up his sweaty nose, 'requests for audiences have always been held here, my Lord Chamberlain.' He paused under the fearsome gaze of his superior. 'Er . . . it is . . . traditional?'

'I know that, you dolt!' thundered Hoff, face crimson with heat and fury. 'Who asked for your damn fool of an opinion anyway?'

'Yes, that is to say, no,' stuttered Morrow, 'that is to say, quite so, my Lord.'

Hoff shook his head with a mighty frown, staring around the room in search of something else to displease him. 'How many more must we endure today?'

'Er . . . four more, your Grace.'

'Damn it!' thundered the Chamberlain, shifting in his huge chair and flapping his fur-trimmed collar to let some air in. 'This is intolerable!' West found himself in silent agreement. Hoff snatched up a silver goblet from the table and took a great slurp of wine. He was a great one for drinking, indeed

he had been drinking all afternoon. It had not improved his temper. 'Who's the next fool?' he demanded.

'Er . . .' Morrow squinted at a large document through his spectacles, tracing across the crabby writing with an inky finger. 'Goodman Heath is next, a farmer from—'

'A farmer? A farmer did you say? So we must sit in this ridiculous heat, listening to some damn commoner moan on about how the weather has affected his sheep?'

'Well, my Lord,' muttered Morrow, 'it does seem as though, er, Goodman Heath has, er, a legitimate grievance against his, er, landlord, and—'

'Damn it all! I am sick to my stomach of other people's grievances!' The Lord Chamberlain took another swallow of wine. 'Show the idiot in!'

The doors were opened and Goodman Heath was allowed into their presence. To underline the balance of power within the room, the Lord Chamberlain's table was raised up on a high dais, so that even standing the poor man had to look up at them. An honest face, but very gaunt. He held a battered hat before him in trembling hands. West shrugged his shoulders in discomfort as a drop of sweat ran down his back.

'You are Goodman Heath, correct?'

'Yes, my Lord,' mumbled the peasant in a broad accent, 'from—'

Hoff cut him off with consummate rudeness. 'And you come before us seeking an audience with his August Majesty, the High King of the Union?'

Goodman Heath licked his lips. West wondered how far he had come to be made a fool of. A very long way, most likely. 'My family have been put off our land. The landlord said we had not been paying the rent but—'

The Lord Chamberlain waved a hand. 'Plainly this is a matter for the Commission for Land and Agriculture. His August Majesty the King is concerned with the welfare of all his subjects, no matter how mean,' West almost winced at this slight, 'but he cannot be expected to give personal attention to every trifling thing. His time is valuable, and so is mine. Good day.' And that was it. Two of the soldiers pulled the double doors open for Goodman Heath to leave.

The peasant's face had gone very pale, his knuckles wringing at the brim of his hat. 'Good my Lord,' he stammered, 'I've already been to the Commission . . .'

Hoff looked up sharply, making the farmer stammer to a halt. 'Good day, I said!'

The peasant's shoulders slumped. He took a last look around the room. Morrow was examining something on the far wall with great interest and refused to meet his eye. The Lord Chamberlain stared back at him angrily, infuriated by this unforgivable waste of his time. West felt sick to be a part of it. Heath turned and shuffled away, head bowed. The doors swung shut.

Hoff bashed his fist on the table. 'Did you see that?' He stared round fiercely at the sweating assembly. 'The sheer gall of the man! Did you see that, Major West?'

'Yes, my Lord Chamberlain, I saw it all,' said West stiffly. 'It was a disgrace.'

Fortunately, Hoff did not take his whole meaning. 'A disgrace, Major West, you are quite right! Why the hell is it that all the promising young men go

into the army? I want to know who is responsible for letting these beggars in here!' He glared at the Under-Secretary, who swallowed and stared at his documents. 'What's next?'

'Er,' mumbled Morrow, 'Coster dan Kault, Magister of the Guild of Mercers.'

'I know who he is, damn it!' snapped Hoff, wiping a fresh sheen of sweat from his face. 'If it isn't the damn peasants it's the damn merchants!' he roared at the soldiers by the door, his voice easily loud enough to be heard in the corridor outside. 'Show the grubbing old swindler in, then!'

Magister Kault could hardly have presented a more different appearance from the previous supplicant. He was a big, plump man, with a face as soft as his eyes were hard. His purple vesture of office was embroidered with yards of golden thread, so ostentatious that the Emperor of Gurkhul himself might have been embarrassed to wear it. He was accompanied by a pair of senior Mercers, their own attire scarcely less magnificent. West wondered if Goodman Heath could earn enough in ten years to pay for one of those gowns. He decided not, even if he hadn't been thrown off his land.

'My Lord Chamberlain,' intoned Kault with an elaborate bow. Hoff acknowledged the head of the Guild of Mercers as faintly as humanly possible, with a raised eyebrow and an almost imperceptible twist of the lip. Kault waited for a greeting which he felt more befitting of his station, but none was forthcoming. He noisily cleared his throat. 'I have come to seek an audience with his August Majesty—'

The Lord Chamberlain snorted. 'The purpose of this session is to decide who is worthy of his Majesty's attention. If you aren't seeking an audience with him you have blundered into the wrong room.' It was already clear that this interview would be every bit as unsuccessful as the last. There was a kind of horrible justice to it, West supposed. The great and the small were treated exactly alike.

Magister Kault's eyes narrowed slightly, but he continued. 'The honourable Guild of Mercers, of whom I am the humble representative . . .' Hoff slurped wine noisily and Kault was obliged to pause for a moment. ' . . . have been the victims of a most malicious and mischievous attack—'

'Fill this up, would you?' yelled the Lord Chamberlain, waving his empty goblet at Morrow. The Under-Secretary slipped eagerly from his chair and seized the decanter. Kault was forced to wait, teeth gritted, while the wine gurgled out.

'Continue!' blustered Hoff, waving his hand, 'we don't have all day!'

'A most malicious and under-handed attack—'

The Lord Chamberlain squinted down. 'An attack you say? A common assault is a matter for the City Watch!'

Magister Kault grimaced. He and his two companions were already starting to sweat. 'Not an attack of that variety, my Lord Chamberlain, but an insidious and underhanded assault, designed to discredit the shining reputation of our Guild, and to damage our business interests in the Free Cities of Styria, and across the Union. An attack perpetrated by certain deceitful elements of his Majesty's Inquisition, and—'

'I have heard enough!' The Lord Chamberlain jerked up his big hand for silence. 'If this is a matter of trade, then it should be handled by His Majesty's

Commission for Trade and Commerce.' Hoff spoke slowly and precisely, in the manner of a school-master addressing his most disappointing pupil. 'If this is a matter of law, then it should be handled by the department of High Justice Marovia. If it is a matter of the internal workings of his Majesty's Inquisition, then you must arrange an appointment with Arch Lector Sult. In any case, it is hardly a matter for the attention of his August Majesty.'

The head of the Mercer's Guild opened his mouth but the Lord Chamberlain spoke over him, voice louder than ever. 'Your King employs a Commission, selects a High Justice, and appoints an Arch Lector, so that he need not deal with every trifling issue himself! Incidentally, that is also why he grants licences to certain merchant guilds, and not to line the pockets . . .' and his lip twisted into an unpleasant sneer ' . . . of the trading class! Good day.' And the doors were opened.

Kault's face had turned pale with anger at that last comment. 'You may depend upon it, Lord Chamberlain,' he said coldly, 'that we will seek redress elsewhere, and with the very greatest of persistence.'

Hoff glared back at him for a very long while. 'Seek it wherever you like,' he growled, 'and with as much persistence as you please. But not here. Good . . . day!' If you could have stabbed someone in the face with the phrase 'good day', the head of the Guild of Mercers would have lain dead on the floor.

Kault blinked a couple of times, then turned angrily and strode out with as much dignity as he could muster. His two lackeys followed close on his heels, their fabulous gowns flapping behind them. The doors were pushed shut.

Hoff smashed the table once again with his fist. 'An outrage!' he spluttered. 'Those arrogant swine! Do they seriously think they can flout the King's law and still seek the King's help when things turn sour?'

'Well, no,' said Morrow, 'of course . . .'

The Lord Chamberlain ignored his Under-Secretary and turned to West with a sneering smile. 'Still, I fancy I could see the vultures circling around them, despite the low ceiling, eh, Major West?'

'Indeed, my Lord Chamberlain,' mumbled West, thoroughly uncomfortable and wishing this torture would end. Then he could get back to his sister. His heart sank. She was even more of a handful than he remembered. She was clever alright, but he worried that she might be too clever for her own good. If only she would just marry some honest man and be happy. His position here was precarious enough, without her making a spectacle of herself.

'Vultures, vultures,' Hoff was murmuring to himself. 'Nasty-looking birds, but they have their uses. What's next?'

The sweating Under-Secretary looked even more uncomfortable than before as he fumbled for the right words. 'We have a party of . . . diplomats?'

The Lord Chamberlain paused, goblet halfway to his mouth. 'Diplomats? From whom?'

'Er . . . from this so-called King of the Northmen, Bethod.'

Hoff burst out laughing. 'Diplomats?' he cackled, mopping his face on his sleeve. 'Savages, you mean!'

The Under-Secretary chuckled unconvincingly. 'Ah yes, my Lord, ha, ha! Savages, of course!'

'But dangerous, eh, Morrow?' snapped the Lord Chamberlain, his good

humour evaporating instantly. The Under-Secretary's cackling gurgled to a halt. 'Very dangerous. We must be careful. Show them in!'

There were four of them. The two smallest were great big, fierce-looking men, scarred and bearded, clad in heavy battered armour. They had been disarmed at the gate of the Agriont, of course, but there was still a sense of danger about them, and West had the feeling they would have given up a lot of big, well-worn weapons. These were the sort of men who were crowded on the borders of Angland, hungry for war, not far from West's home.

With them came an older man, also in pitted armour, and with long hair and a great white beard. There was a livid scar across his face and through his eye, which was blind white. He had a broad smile on his lips though, and his pleasant demeanour was greatly at odds with that of his two dour companions, and with the fourth man, who came behind.

He had to stoop to get under the lintel, which was a good seven feet above the floor. He was swathed and hooded in a rough brown cloak, features invisible. As he straightened up, towering over everyone else, the room began to seem absurdly cramped. His sheer bulk was intimidating, but there was something more, something that seemed to come off him in sickly waves. The soldiers around the walls felt it, and they shifted uncomfortably. The Under-Secretary for Audiences felt it, sweating and twitching and fussing with his documents. Major West certainly felt it. His skin had gone cold despite the heat, and he could feel every hair on his body standing up under his damp uniform.

Only Hoff seemed unaffected. He looked the four Northmen up and down with a deep frown on his face, no more impressed with the hooded giant than he had been with Goodman Heath. 'So you are messengers from Bethod.' He rolled the words around in his mouth, then spat them out, 'The King of the Northmen.'

'We are,' said the smiling old man, bowing with great reverence. 'I am White-Eye Hansul.' His voice was rich, round and pleasant, without any accent, not at all what West had been expecting.

'And you are Bethod's emissary?' asked Hoff casually, taking another swallow of wine from his goblet. For the first time ever West was pleased the Lord Chamberlain was in the room with him, but then he glanced up at the hooded man and the feeling of unease returned.

'Oh no,' said White-Eye, 'I am here merely as translator. This is the emissary of the King of the Northmen,' and his good eye flicked nervously up to the dark figure in the cloak, as though even he was afraid. 'Fenris.' He stretched out the 's' on the end of the name so that it hissed in the air. 'Fenris the Feared.'

An apt name indeed. Major West thought back to songs he had heard in his childhood, stories of bloodthirsty giants in the mountains of the distant north. The room was silent for a moment.

'Humph,' said the Lord Chamberlain, unmoved. 'And you seek an audience with his August Majesty, the High King of the Union?'

'We do indeed, my Lord Chamberlain,' said the old warrior. 'Our master, Bethod, greatly regrets the hostility between our two nations. He wishes only to be on the best of terms with his southern neighbours. We bring an offer of

peace from my King to yours, and a gift to show our good faith. Nothing more.'

'Well, well,' said Hoff, sitting back in his high chair with a broad smile. 'A gracious request, graciously made. You may see the King in Open Council tomorrow, and present your offer, and your gift, before the foremost peers of the realm.'

White-Eye bowed respectfully. 'You are most kind, my Lord Chamberlain.' He turned for the door, followed by the two dour warriors. The cloaked figure lingered for a moment, then he too slowly turned and stooped through the doorway. It wasn't until the doors were shut that West could breathe easily again. He shook his head and shrugged his sweaty shoulders. Songs about giants indeed. A great big man in a cloak was all. But looking again, that doorway really was very high . . .

'There, you see, Master Morrow?' Hoff looked intensely pleased with himself. 'Hardly the savages you led me to expect! I feel we are close to a resolution of our northern problems, don't you?'

The Under-Secretary did not look in the least convinced. 'Er . . . yes, my Lord, of course.'

'Yes indeed. A lot of fuss over nothing. A lot of pessimistic, defeatist nonsense from our jumpy citizens up north, eh? War? Bah!' Hoff whacked his hand on the table again, making wine slop out of his goblet and spatter on the wood. 'These Northmen wouldn't dare! Why, next thing you know they'll be petitioning us for membership of the Union! You see if I'm not right, eh, Major West?'

'Er ...'

'Good! Excellent! We've got something done today at least! One more and we can get out of this damn furnace! Who do we have, Morrow?'

The Under-Secretary frowned and pushed his glasses up his nose. 'Er . . . we have one Yoru Sulfur,' he wrestled with the unfamiliar name.

'We have a who?'

'Er . . . Sulfir, or Sulfor, or something.'

'Never heard of him,' grunted the Lord Chamberlain, 'what manner of a man is he? Some kind of a southerner? Not another peasant, please!'

The Under-Secretary examined his notes, and swallowed. 'An emissary?'

'Yes, yes, but from whom?'

Morrow was positively cringing, like a child expecting a slap. 'From the Great Order of Magi!' he blurted out.

There was a moment of stunned silence. West's eyebrows went up and his jaw came open, and he guessed that the same was happening, unseen, behind the visors of the soldiers. He winced instinctively as he anticipated the response of the Lord Chamberlain, but Hoff surprised them all by bursting into peals of laughter. 'Excellent! At last some entertainment. It's been years since we had a Magus here! Show in the wizard! We mustn't keep him waiting!'

Yoru Sulfur was something of a disappointment. He had simple, travel-stained clothes, was scarcely better dressed than Goodman Heath had been, in fact. His staff was not shod with gold, had no lump of shining crystal on the end. His eye did not flash with a mysterious fire. He looked a fairly ordinary sort of a man in his middle thirties, slightly tired, as though after a long

journey, but otherwise well at his ease before the Lord Chamberlain.

‘A good day to you, gentlemen,’ he said, leaning on his staff. West was having some difficulty working out where he was from. Not the Union, because his skin was too dark, and not Gurkhul or the far south, because his skin was too light. Not from the North or from Styria. Further then, but where? Now that West looked at him more closely he noticed that his eyes were different colours: one blue, one green.

‘And a good day to you, sir,’ said Hoff, smiling as though he really meant it. ‘My door is forever open to the Great Order of Magi. Tell me, do I have the pleasure of addressing great Bayaz himself?’

Sulfur looked puzzled. ‘No, was I wrongly announced? I am Yoru Sulfur. Master Bayaz is a bald gentleman.’ He pushed a hand through his own head of curly brown hair. ‘There is a statue of him outside in the avenue. But I did have the honour to study under him for several years. He is a most powerful and knowledgeable master.’

‘Of course! Of course he is! And how may we be of service?’

Yoru Sulfur cleared his throat, as though to tell a story. ‘On the death of King Harod the Great, Bayaz, the First of the Magi, left the Union. But he swore an oath to return.’

‘Yes, yes, that’s true,’ chuckled Hoff. ‘Very true, every school-child knows it.’

‘And he pronounced that, when he returned, his coming would be heralded by another.’

‘True, also.’

‘Well,’ said Sulfur, smiling broadly, ‘here I am.’

The Lord Chamberlain roared with laughter. ‘Here you are!’ he shouted, thumping the table. Harlen Morrow allowed himself a little chuckle, but shut up immediately as Hoff’s smile began to fade.

‘During my tenure as Lord Chamberlain, I have had three members of the Great Order of Magi apply to me for audiences with the King. Two were most clearly insane, and one was an exceptionally courageous swindler.’ He leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table and steepling his fingers before him. ‘Tell me, Master Sulfur, which kind of Magus are you?’

‘I am neither of those.’

‘I see. Then you will have documents.’

‘Of course.’ Sulfur reached into his coat and brought out a small letter, closed with a white seal, a single strange symbol stamped into it. He placed it carelessly on the table before the Lord Chamberlain.

Hoff frowned. He picked up the document and turned it over in his hands. He examined the seal carefully, then he dabbed his face with his sleeve, broke the wax, unfolded the thick paper and began to read.

Yoru Sulfur showed no sign of nerves. He didn’t appear troubled by the heat. He strolled around the room, he nodded to the armoured soldiers, he didn’t seem upset by their lack of response. He turned suddenly to West. ‘It’s terribly hot in here, isn’t it? It’s a wonder these poor fellows don’t pass out, and crash to the floor with a sound like a cupboard full of saucepans.’ West blinked. He had been thinking the very same thing.

The Lord Chamberlain put the letter down carefully on the table, no longer in the least amused. ‘It occurs to me that the Open Council would be the

wrong place to discuss this matter.'

'I agree. I was hoping for a private audience with Lord Chancellor Feekt.'

'I am afraid that will not be possible.' Hoff licked his lips. 'Lord Feekt is dead.'

Sulfur frowned. 'That is most unfortunate.'

'Indeed, indeed. We all feel his loss most keenly. Perhaps I and certain other members of the Closed Council can assist you.'

Sulfur bowed his head. 'I am guided by you, my Lord Chamberlain.'

'I will try to arrange something for later this evening. Until then we will find you some lodgings within the Agriont . . . suitable for your station.' He signalled to the guards, and the doors were opened.

'Thank you so much, Lord Hoff. Master Morrow. Major West.' Sulfur nodded to them graciously, each in turn, and then turned and left. The doors were closed once more, leaving West wondering how the man had known his name.

Hoff turned to his Under-Secretary for Audiences. 'Go immediately to Arch Lector Sult, and tell him we must meet at once. Then fetch High Justice Marovia, and Lord Marshal Varuz. Tell them it is a matter of the very highest importance, and not a word of this to anyone beyond those three.' He shook his finger in Morrow's sweaty face. 'Not a word!'

The Under-Secretary stared back, spectacles askew. 'Now!' roared Hoff. Morrow leapt to his feet, stumbled on the hem of his gown, then hurried out through a side door. West swallowed, his mouth very dry.

Hoff stared long and hard at each man in the room. 'As for the rest of you, not a word to anyone about any of this, or the consequences for all of you will be most severe! Now out, everyone out!' The soldiers clanked from the room immediately. West needed no further encouragement and he hurried after them, leaving the brooding Lord Chamberlain alone in his high chair.

West's thoughts were dark and confused as he pulled the door shut behind him. Fragments of old stories of the Magi, fears about war in the North, images of a hooded giant, towering up near the ceiling. There had been some strange and some sinister visitors to the Agriont that day, and he felt quite weighed down by worries. He tried to shrug them off, told himself it was all foolishness, but then all he could think of was his sister, cavorting about the Agriont like a fool.

He groaned to himself. She was probably with Luthar right now. Why the hell had he introduced the two of them? For some reason he had been expecting the same awkward, sickly, sharp-tongued girl he remembered from years ago. He had got quite a shock when this woman had turned up at his quarters. He had barely recognised her. Undoubtedly a woman, and a fine-looking one too. Meanwhile, Luthar was arrogant and rich and handsome and had all the self-restraint of a six-year old. He knew they had seen each other since, and more than once. Just as friends, of course. Ardee had no other friends here. Just friends.

'Shit!' he cursed. It was like putting a cat by the cream and trusting it not to stick its tongue in. Why the hell hadn't he thought it through? It was a damn disaster in the making! But what could he do about it now? He stared off miserably down the hallway.

There's nothing like seeing another's misery to make you forget your own,

and Goodman Heath was a sorry sight indeed. He was sitting alone on a long bench, face deathly pale, staring off into space. He must have been sitting there all this time, while the Mercers and the Northmen and the Magus came and went, waiting for nothing but with nowhere left to go. West glanced up and down the hallway. There was no one else nearby. Heath was oblivious to him, mouth open, eyes glassy, battered hat forgotten on his knees.

West couldn't simply leave the man like this, he didn't have it in him.

'Goodman Heath,' he said as he approached, and the peasant looked up at him, surprised. He fumbled for his hat and made to rise, muttering apologies.

'No, please, don't get up.' West sat down on the bench. He stared at his feet, unable to look the man in the eye. There was an awkward silence. 'I have a friend who sits on the Commission for Land and Agriculture. There might be something he can do for you . . .' He trailed off, embarrassed, squinting up the corridor.

The farmer gave a sad smile. 'I'd be right grateful for anything you could do.'

'Yes, yes, of course, I'll do what I can.' It would do no good whatsoever, and they both knew it. West grimaced and bit his lip. 'You'd better take this,' and he pressed his purse into the peasant's limp, calloused fingers. Heath looked at him, mouth slightly open. West gave a quick, awkward smile then got to his feet. He was very keen to be off.

'Sir!' called Goodman Heath after him, but West was already hurrying down the corridor, and he didn't look back.

On the List

Why do I do this? The outline of Villem dan Robb's townhouse was cut out in black against the clear night sky. It was an unremarkable building, a two-storey-dwelling with a low wall and a gate in front, just like a hundred others in this street. *Our old friend Rews used to live in a palatial great villa near the market. Robb really should have asked him for some more ambitious bribes. Still. Lucky for us he didn't.* Elsewhere in the city the fashionable avenues would be brightly lit and busy with drunken revellers right through until dawn. But this secluded side street was far from the bright lights and the prying eyes.

We can work undisturbed.

Round the side of the building, on the upper floor, a lamp was burning in a narrow window. *Good. Our friend is at home. But still awake – we must tread gently.* He turned to Practical Frost and pointed down the side of the house. The albino nodded and slipped away silently across the street.

Glokta waited for him to reach the wall and disappear into the shadows beside the building, then he turned to Severard and pointed at the front door. The eyes of the lanky Practical smiled at him for a moment, then he scuttled quickly away, staying low, rolled over the low wall and dropped without a sound onto the other side.

Perfect so far, but now I must move. Glokta wondered why he had come. Frost and Severard were more than capable of dealing with Robb by themselves, and he would only slow them down. *I might even fall on my arse and alert the idiot to our presence. So why did I come?* But Glokta knew why. The feeling of excitement was already building in his throat. It felt almost like being alive.

He had muffled the end of his cane with a bit of rag, so he was able to limp to the wall, ever so delicately, without making too much noise. By that time Severard had swung the gate open, holding the hinge with one gloved hand so that it didn't make a noise. *Nice and neat. That little wall might as well be a hundred feet high for all my chances of getting over it.*

Severard was kneeling on the step against the front door, picking the lock. His ear was close to the wood, his eyes squinting with concentration, gloved hands moving deftly. Glokta's heart was beating fast, his skin prickly with tension. *Ah, the thrill of the hunt.*

There was a soft click, then another. Severard slipped his glittering picks into a pocket, then reached out and slowly, carefully turned the doorknob. The door swung silently open. *What a useful fellow he is. Without him and Frost I am just a cripple. They are my hands, my arms, my legs. But I am their brains.* Severard slipped inside and Glokta followed him, wincing with pain every time he put his weight on his left leg.

The hallway was dark, but there was a shaft of light spilling down the stairs from above and the banisters cast strange, distorted shadows on the wooden floor. Glokta pointed up the steps, and Severard nodded and began to tiptoe

toward them, keeping his feet close to the wall. It seemed to take him an age to get there.

The third step made a quiet creaking sound as he put his weight on it. Glokta winced, Severard froze in place. They waited, still as statues. There was no sound from upstairs. Glokta began to breathe again. Severard moved ever so slowly upwards, step by gentle step. As he got towards the top he peered cautiously round the corner, back pressed against the wall, then he took the last step and disappeared from view without a sound.

Practical Frost emerged from the shadows at the far end of the corridor. Glokta raised an eyebrow at him but he shook his head. *Nobody downstairs.* He turned to the front door and started to close it, ever so gently. Only when it was shut did he slowly, slowly release the doorknob, so the latch slid silently into place.

‘You’ll want to see this.’

Glokta gave a start at the sudden sound, turning round quickly and causing a jolt of pain to shoot through his back. Severard was standing, hands on hips, at the head of the stairs. He turned and made off towards the light, and Frost bounded up the steps after him, no longer making any pretence at stealth.

Why can no one ever stay on the ground floor? Always upstairs. At least he didn’t have to try to be quiet as he struggled up the steps after his Practicals, right foot creaking, left foot scraping on the boards. Bright lamplight was flooding out into the upstairs corridor from an open door at the far end, and Glokta limped toward it. He paused as he crossed the threshold, catching his breath after the climb.

Oh dear me, what a mess. A big bookcase had been torn away from the wall, and books were scattered, open and closed, all about the floor. A glass of wine had been knocked over on the desk, making sodden red rags of the crumpled papers strewn across it. The bed was in disarray, the covers pulled half off, the pillows and the mattress slashed and spilling feathers. A wardrobe had its doors open, one of them dangling half off. A few tattered garments were hanging inside, but most were lying torn in a heap below.

A handsome young man lay on his back under the window, staring up, pale-faced and open mouthed at the ceiling. It would have been an understatement to say that his throat had been cut. It had been hacked so savagely that his head was only just still attached. There was blood splattered everywhere, on the torn clothes, on the slashed mattress, all over the body itself. There were a couple of smeared, bloody palm-prints on the wall, a great pool of blood across a good part of the floor, still wet. *He was killed tonight. Perhaps only a few hours ago. Perhaps only a few minutes.*

‘I don’t think he’ll be answering our questions,’ said Severard.

‘No.’ Glokta’s eyes drifted over the wreckage. ‘I think he might be dead. But how did it happen?’

Frost fixed him with a pink eye and raised a white eyebrow. ‘Poithon?’

Severard spluttered with shrill laughter under his mask. Even Glokta allowed himself a chuckle. ‘Clearly. But how did our poison get in?’

‘Open wi’ow,’ mumbled Frost, pointing at the floor.

Glokta limped into the room, careful not to let his feet or his cane touch the sticky mess of blood and feathers. ‘So, our poison saw the lamp burning, just

as we did. He entered via the downstairs window. He climbed silently up the stairs.' Glokta turned the corpse's hands over with the tip of his cane. *A few specks of blood from the neck, but no damage to the knuckles or the fingers. He did not struggle. He was taken by surprise.* He craned forward and peered at the gaping wound.

'A single, powerful cut. Probably with a knife.'

'And Villem dan Robb has sprung a most serious leak,' said Severard.

'And we are short one informant,' mused Glokta. There had been no blood in the corridor. *Our man took pains not to get his feet wet while searching the room, however messy it may look. He was not angry or afraid. It was just a job.*

'The killer was a professional,' murmured Glokta, 'he came here with murder in mind. Then perhaps he made this little effort to give the appearance of a burglary, who can say? Either way, the Arch Lector won't be satisfied with a corpse.' He looked up at his two Practicals. 'Who's next on the list?'

This time there had been a struggle, without a doubt. *If a one-sided one.* Solimo Scandi was sprawled on his side, facing the wall, as though embarrassed by the state of his slashed and tattered nightshirt. There were deep cuts in his forearms. *Where he struggled vainly to ward off the blade.* He had crawled across the floor, leaving a bloody trail across the highly polished wood. *Where he struggled vainly to get away.* He had failed. The four gaping knife wounds in his back had been the end of him.

Glokta felt his face twitching as he looked down at the bloody corpse. *One body might just be a coincidence. Two make a conspiracy.* His eyelid fluttered. *Whoever did this knew we were coming, and when, and precisely who for. They are one step ahead of us. More than likely, our list of accomplices has already become a list of corpses.* There was a creaking sound behind Glokta and his head whipped round, sending shooting pains down his stiff neck. Nothing but the open window swinging in the breeze. *Calm, now. Calm, and think it out.*

'It would seem the honourable Guild of Mercers have been doing a little housekeeping.'

'How could they know?' muttered Severard.

How indeed? 'They must have seen Rews' list, or been told who was on it.' And that means . . . Glokta licked at his empty gums. 'Someone inside the Inquisition has been talking.'

For once, Severard's eyes were not smiling. 'If they know who's on the list, they know who wrote it. They know who we are.'

Three more names on the list, perhaps? Down at the bottom? Glokta grinned. *How very exciting. 'You scared?'*

'I'm not happy, I'll tell you that.' He nodded down at the corpse. 'A knife in the back isn't part of my plan.'

'Nor mine, Severard, believe me.' *No indeed. If I die, I'll never know who betrayed us.*

And I want to know.

A bright, cloudless spring day, and the park was busy with fops and idlers of every variety. Glokta sat very still on his bench, in the merciful shade of a spreading tree, and stared out at the shimmering greenery, the sparkling water, the happy, the drunken, the colourful revellers. There were people

wedged together on the benches around the lake, pairs and groups scattered around the grass, drinking and talking and basking in the sun. There seemed no space for any more.

But no one came and sat next to Glokta. Occasionally somebody would hurry up, hardly able to believe their luck in finding such a spot, then they would see him sitting there. Their faces would fall and they would swerve away, or walk right past as though they had never meant to sit. *I drive them away as surely as the plague, but perhaps that's just as well. I don't need their company.*

He watched a group of young soldiers rowing a boat on the lake. One of them stood up, wobbling around, holding forth with a bottle in his hand. The boat rocked alarmingly, and his companions shouted at him to get down. Vague gales of good-natured laughter came wafting through the air, delayed a little by the distance. *Children. How young they look. How innocent. And such was I, not long ago. It seems a thousand years, though. Longer. It seems a different world.*

'Glokta.'

He looked up, shading his eyes with his hand. It was Arch Lector Sult, arrived at last, a tall dark shape against the blue sky. Glokta thought he looked a little more tired, more lined, more drawn than usual as he stared coldly down.

'This had better be interesting,' Sult flicked out the tails of his long white coat and lowered himself gracefully onto the bench. 'The commoners are up in arms again near Keln. Some idiot of a landowner hangs a few peasants and now we have a mess to deal with! How hard can it be to manage a field full of dirt and a couple of farmers? You don't have to treat them well, just as long as you don't hang them!' His mouth was a straight, hard line as he glared out across the lawns. 'This had better be damned interesting.'

Then I'll try not to disappoint you. 'Villem dan Robb is dead.' As though to add emphasis to Glokta's statement, the drunken soldier slipped and toppled over the side of the boat, splashing into the water. His friends' screams of laughter reached Glokta a moment later. 'He was murdered.'

'Huh. It happens. Pick up the next man on the list.' Sult got to his feet, frowning. 'I didn't think you'd need my approval for every little thing. That's why I picked you for this job. Just get on with it!' he snapped as he turned away.

There's no need to rush, Arch Lector. That's the trouble with good legs, you tend to run around too much. If you have trouble moving, on the other hand, you don't move until you damn well know it's time. 'The next man on the list also suffered a mishap.'

Sult turned back, one eyebrow slightly raised. 'He did?'

'They all did.'

The Arch Lector pursed his lips, sat back down on the bench. 'All of them?'

'All of them.'

'Hmm,' mused Sult. 'That is interesting. The Mercers are cleaning up, are they? I hardly expected such ruthlessness. Times have changed, alright, times have certainly . . .' He trailed off, slowly starting to frown. 'You think someone gave them Rews' list, don't you? You think one of ours has been talking. That's

why you asked me to come here, isn't it?"

Did you think I was just avoiding the stairs? 'Each one of them killed? Each and every name on our list? The very night we go to arrest them? I am not a great believer in coincidences.' Are you, Arch Lector?

He was evidently not. His face had turned very grim. 'Who saw the confession?"

'Me, and my two Practicals, of course.'

'You have absolute confidence in them?"

'Absolute.' There was a pause. The boat was drifting, rudderless, as the soldiers scrambled about, oars sticking up in the air, the man in the water splashing and laughing, spraying water over his friends.

'The confession was in my office for some time,' murmured the Arch Lector. 'Some members of my staff could have seen it. Could have.'

'You have absolute confidence in them, your Eminence?"

Sult stared at Glokta for a long, icy moment. 'They wouldn't dare. They know me better than that.'

'That leaves Superior Kalyne,' said Glokta quietly.

The Arch Lector's lips hardly moved as he spoke. 'You must tread carefully, Inquisitor, very carefully. The ground is not at all safe where you are walking. Fools do not become Superiors of the Inquisition, despite appearances. Kalyne has many friends, both within the House of Questions and outside it. Powerful friends. Any accusation against him must be backed up by the very strongest of proof.' Sult stopped suddenly, waiting for a small group of ladies to pass out of earshot. 'The very strongest of proof,' he hissed, once they had moved away. 'You must find me this assassin.'

Easier said than done. 'Of course, your Eminence, but my investigation has reached something of a dead end.'

'Not quite. We still have one card left to play. Rew's himself.'

Rew's? 'But, Arch Lector, he will be in Angland by now.' Sweating down a mine or some such. If he has even lasted this long.

'No. He is here in the Agriont, under lock and key. I thought it best to hold on to him.' Glokta did his utmost to contain his surprise. *Clever. Very clever. Fools do not become Arch Lectors either, it seems.* 'Rew's will be your bait. I will have my secretary carry a message to Kalyne, letting him know that I have relented. That I am prepared to let the Mercers continue to operate, but under tighter control. That as a gesture of goodwill I have let Rew's go. If Kalyne is the source of our leak, I daresay he will let the Mercers know that Rew's is free. I daresay they will send this assassin to punish him for his loose tongue. I daresay you could take him while he is trying. If the killer doesn't come, well, we might have to look for our traitor elsewhere, and we have lost nothing.'

'An excellent plan, your Eminence.'

Sult stared at him coldly. 'Of course. You will need somewhere to operate, somewhere far from the House of Questions. I will make the funds available, have Rew's delivered to your Practicals, and let you know when Kalyne has the information. Find me this assassin, Glokta, and squeeze him. Squeeze him until the pips squeak.' The boat lurched wildly as the soldiers tried to haul their wet companion in, then it suddenly turned right over, dumping them all into the water.

'I want names,' hissed Sult, glowering at the splashing soldiers, 'I want names, and evidence, and documents, and people who will stand up in Open Council and point fingers.' He stood up smoothly from the bench. 'Keep me informed.' He strode off towards the House of Questions, feet crunching on the gravel of the path, and Glokta watched him go. *An excellent plan. I'm glad you're on my side, Arch Lector. You are on my side, aren't you?*

The soldiers had succeeded in hauling the upended boat onto the bank and were standing, dripping wet, shouting at one another, no longer so good-humoured. One of the oars was still floating, abandoned in the water, drifting gradually towards the point where the stream flowed from the lake. Soon it would pass under the bridge and be carried out, beneath the great walls of the Agriont and into the moat. Glokta watched it turning slowly round in the water. *A mistake. One should attend to the details. It is easy to forget the little things, but without the oar, the boat is useless.*

He let his gaze wander across some of the other faces in the park. His eye alighted on a handsome pair sitting on a bench by the lake. The young man was speaking quietly to the girl, a sad and earnest expression on his face. She got up quickly, moving away from him with her hands over her face. *Ah, the pain of the jilted lover. The loss, the anger, the shame. It seems as though you'll never recover. What poet was it who wrote there's no pain worse than the pain of a broken heart? Sentimental shit. He should have spent more time in the Emperor's prisons.* He smiled, opening his mouth and licking the empty gums where his front teeth used to be. *Broken hearts heal with time, but broken teeth never do.*

Glokta looked at the young man. He had an expression of slight amusement on his face as he watched the weeping girl walk away. *The young bastard! I wonder if he's broken as many hearts as I did, in my youth? It hardly seems possible now. It takes me half an hour just to pluck up the courage to stand. The only women I've made cry lately have been the wives of those I've had exiled to Angland—*

'Sand.'

Glokta turned around. 'Lord Marshal Varuz, what an honour.'

'Oh no, no,' said the old soldier, sitting down on the bench with the swift, precise movements of the fencing master. 'You look well,' he said, but without really looking. *I look crippled, you mean.* 'How are you, my old friend?' *I'm crippled, you pompous old ass. And friend, is it? All those years since I came back, and you have never sought me out, not once. Is that a friendship?*

'Well enough, thank you, Lord Marshal.'

Varuz shifted uncomfortably on the bench. 'My latest student, Captain Luthar . . . perhaps you know him?'

'We are acquainted.'

'You should see his forms.' Varuz shook his head sadly. 'He has the talent, alright, though he will never be in your class, Sand.' *I don't know. I hope some day he'll be just as crippled as I am.* 'But he has plenty of talent, enough to win. Only he's wasting it. Throwing it away.' *Oh, the tragedy of it. I am so upset I could be sick. Had I eaten anything this morning.*

'He is lazy, Sand, and stubborn. He lacks courage. He lacks dedication. His heart is just not in it, and time is running out. I was wondering, if you have the time of course,' Varuz looked Glokta in the eye for just an instant,

‘whether you might be able to speak to him for me.’

I can hardly wait! Lecturing that whining ass would be the realisation of all my dreams. You arrogant old dolt, how dare you? You built your reputation on my successes, then when I needed your help you cut me off. And now you come to me, and seek my help, and call me friend?

‘Of course, Marshal Varuz, I would be glad to speak to him. Anything for an old friend.’

‘Excellent, excellent! I’m sure you’ll make all the difference! I train him every morning, in that courtyard near the House of the Maker, where I used to train you . . .’ The old Marshal trailed off awkwardly.

‘I will come as soon as my duties permit.’

‘Of course, your duties . . .’ Varuz was already getting up, evidently keen to be on his way. Glokta held out his hand, making the old soldier pause for a moment. *You needn’t worry, Lord Marshal, I am not contagious.* Varuz gave it a limp shake, as though worried it might snap off, then he mumbled his excuses and strode away, head held high. The dripping soldiers bowed and saluted as he walked past, somewhat embarrassed.

Glokta stretched out his leg, wondering whether to get up. *And go where? The world will not end if I sit here a moment longer. There is no rush. No rush.*

An Offer and a Gift

‘And, forward!’ bellowed Marshal Varuz. Jezal lurched at him, toes curling round the edges of the beam, trying desperately to keep his balance, making a clumsy lunge or two just to give the impression of his heart being in Four hours of training a day were taking their toll on him, and he felt beyond mere exhaustion.

Varuz frowned and flicked Jezal’s blunted steel aside, moving effortlessly along the beam as though it was a garden path. ‘And back!’

Jezal stumbled back on his heels, left arm waving stupidly around him in an attempt to keep his balance. Everything above his knees was aching terribly from the effort. Below the knees it was much, much worse. Varuz was over sixty, but he showed no signs of fatigue. He wasn’t even sweating as he danced forward down the beam, swishing his steels around. Jezal himself was gasping for air as he parried desperately with his left hand, badly off balance, his right foot fishing in space for the safety of the beam behind him.

‘And, forward!’ Jezal’s calves were agony as he stumbled to change his direction and shove a blow at the infuriating old man, but Varuz did not move back. Instead he ducked under the despairing cut and used the back of his arm to sweep Jezal’s feet away.

Jezal let out a howl as the courtyard turned over around him. His leg smacked painfully against the edge of the beam, then he sprawled on his face on the grass, chin thumping into the turf and making his teeth rattle. He rolled a short distance then lay there on his back, gasping like a fish snatched suddenly from the water, leg throbbing where it had collided with the beam on his way down. He would have yet another ugly bruise in the morning.

‘Awful, Jezal, awful!’ cried the old soldier as he sprang nimbly down onto the lawn. ‘You teeter about the beam as though it were a tightrope!’ Jezal rolled over, cursing, and started to climb stiffly to his feet. ‘It is a solid piece of oak, wide enough to get lost in!’ The Lord Marshal illustrated his point by whacking at the beam with his short steel, making splinters fly.

‘I thought you said forward,’ moaned Jezal.

Varuz’ eyebrows went up sharply. ‘Do you seriously suppose, Captain Luthar, that Bremer dan Gorst gives his opponents reliable information as to his intentions?’

‘Bremer dan Gorst will be trying to beat me, you old shit! You are supposed to be helping me to beat him!’ That was what Jezal thought, but he knew better than to say it. He just shook his head dumbly.

‘No! No indeed he does not! He makes every effort to deceive and confuse his opponents, as all great swordsmen must!’ The Lord Marshal paced up and down, shaking his head. Jezal considered again whether to give it all up. He was sick of falling into bed exhausted each night, at a time when he should have been just starting to get drunk. He was sick of waking up every morning,

bruised and aching, to face another four interminable hours of running, beam, bar, forms. He was sick of being knocked on his arse by Major West. Most of all he was sick of being bullied by this old fool.

‘ . . . A depressing display, Captain, very depressing. I do believe you are actually getting worse ...’

Jezal would never win the Contest. No one expected him to, himself least of all. So why not give it up, and go back to his cards and late nights? Wasn’t that all he really wanted from life? But then what would mark him out from a thousand other noble younger sons? He had decided long ago that he wanted to be something special. A Lord Marshal himself perhaps, and then Lord Chamberlain. Something big and important anyway. He wanted a big chair on the Closed Council, and to make big decisions. He wanted people to fawn and smile around him and hang on his every word. He wanted people to whisper, ‘There goes Lord Luthar!’ as he swept past. Could he be happy being forever a richer, cleverer, better-looking version of Lieutenant Brint? Ugh! It was not to be thought of.

‘ . . . We have a terribly long way to go, and not enough time to get there, not unless you change your attitude. Your sparring is lamentable, your stamina is still weak, and as for your balance, the less said about that the better ...’

And what would everyone else think if he gave up? What would his father do? What would his brothers say? What about the other officers? He would look a coward. And then there was Ardee West. She seemed to have been much on his mind during the past couple of days. Would she lean so close to him if he didn’t fence? Would she talk to him in such soft tones? Would she laugh at his jokes? Would she look up at him with those big, dark eyes, so he could almost feel her breath on his face—

‘Are you listening, boy?’ thundered Varuz. Jezal felt a bit of his breath on his face alright, and a deal of spit too.

‘Yes, sir! Sparring lamentable, stamina weak!’ Jezal swallowed nervously. ‘Less said about balance the better.’

‘That’s right! I am beginning to think, though I can hardly believe it after the trouble you have put me to, that your heart really isn’t in this.’ He glared into Jezal’s eyes. ‘What do you think, Major?’

There was no reply. West was slumped in his chair, arms folded, frowning grimly and staring into space.

‘Major West?’ snapped the Lord Marshal.

He looked up suddenly, as though he had only just become aware of their presence. ‘I’m sorry, sir, I had become distracted.’

‘So I see.’ Varuz sucked his teeth. ‘It seems that nobody has been concentrating this morning.’ It was a great relief that some of the old man’s anger had been deflected elsewhere, but Jezal’s happiness was not long-lived.

‘Very well,’ snapped the old Marshal, ‘if that’s the way you want it. Starting tomorrow we will begin each session with a swim in the moat. A mile or two should do it.’ Jezal squeezed his teeth together to keep from screaming. ‘Cold water has a wonderful way of sharpening the senses. And perhaps we need to start a little earlier, to catch you in your most receptive frame of mind. That means we begin at five. In the meantime, Captain Luthar, I suggest that you

consider whether you are here in order to win the Contest, or simply for the pleasure of my company.' And he turned on his heel and stalked off.

Jezal waited until Varuz had left the courtyard before losing his temper, but once he was sure the old man was out of earshot he flung his steels against the wall in a fury.

'Damn it!' he shouted as the swords rattled to the ground. 'Shit!' He looked around for something to kick that wouldn't hurt too much. His eye lighted on the leg of the beam, but he misjudged the kick badly and had to stifle the urge to grab his bruised foot and hop around like an idiot. 'Shit, shit!' he raged.

West was disappointingly unimpressed. He got up, frowning, and made to follow Marshal Varuz.

'Where are you off to?' asked Jezal.

'Away,' said West, over his shoulder, 'I've seen enough.'

'What does that mean?'

West stopped and turned to face him. 'Amazing though it may seem, there are bigger problems in the world than this.'

Jezal stood there open mouthed as West stalked from the courtyard. 'Just who do you think you are?' he shouted after him, once he was sure he was gone. 'Shit, shit!' He considered giving the beam another kick, but thought better of it.

Jezal was in a foul mood on his way back to his quarters, so he stayed away from the busier parts of the Agriont, sticking to the quieter lanes and gardens to the side of the Kingsway. He glowered down at his feet as he walked, to further discourage any social encounter. But luck was not on his side.

'Jezal!' It was Kaspas, out for a stroll with a yellow-haired girl in expensive clothes. They had a severe-looking middle-aged woman with them, no doubt the girl's governess or some such. They had stopped to admire some piece of minor sculpture in a little-visited yard.

'Jezal!' Kaspas shouted again, waving his hat above his head. There was no avoiding them. He plastered an unconvincing smile onto his face and stalked over. The pale girl smiled at him as he approached, but if he was meant to be charmed he didn't feel it.

'Been fencing again, Luthar?' asked Kaspas pointlessly. Jezal was sweating and holding a pair of fencing steels. It was well known that he fenced every morning. You didn't need a fine mind to make the connection, which was fortunate, because Kaspas certainly didn't have one.

'Yes. How did you guess?' Jezal hadn't meant to kill the conversation quite so dead, but he passed it off with a false chuckle, and the smiles of the ladies soon returned.

'Hah, hah,' laughed Kaspas, ever willing to be the butt of a joke.

'Jezal, may I introduce my cousin, the Lady Ariss dan Kaspas? This is my superior officer, Captain Luthar.' So this was the famous cousin. One of the Union's richest heiresses and from an excellent family. Kaspas was always babbling about what a beauty she was, but to Jezal she seemed a pale, skinny, sickly-looking thing. She smiled weakly and offered out her limp, white hand.

He brushed it with the most perfunctory of kisses. 'Charmed,' he muttered, without relish. 'I must apologise for my appearance, I've just been fencing.'

‘Yes,’ she squeaked, in a high, piping voice, once she was sure he had finished speaking. ‘I have heard you are a great fencer.’ There was a pause while she groped for something to say, then her eyes lit up. ‘Tell me Captain, is fencing really very dangerous?’

What insipid drivel. ‘Oh no, my lady, we only use blunted steels in the circle.’ He could have said more, but he was damned if he was going to make all the effort. He gave a thin smile. So did she. The conversation hovered over the abyss.

Jeza! was about to make his excuses, the subject of fencing evidently exhausted, but Ariss cut him off by blundering on to another topic. ‘And tell me, Captain, is there really likely to be a war in the North?’ Her voice had almost entirely faded away by the end of the sentence, but the chaperone stared on approvingly, no doubt delighted by the conversational skills of her charge.

Spare us. ‘Well it seems to me . . .’ Jeza! began. The pale, blue eyes of Lady Ariss stared back at him expectantly. Blue eyes are absolute crap, he reflected. He wondered which subject she was more ignorant of: fencing or politics? ‘What do you think?’

The chaperone’s brow furrowed slightly. Lady Ariss looked somewhat taken aback, blushing slightly as she groped for words. ‘Well, er . . . that is to say . . . I’m sure that everything will . . . turn out well?’

Thank the fates! thought Jeza!, we are saved! He had to get out of here. ‘Of course, everything will turn out well.’ He forced out one more smile. ‘It has been a real pleasure to make your acquaintance, but I’m afraid I’m on duty shortly, so I must leave you.’ He bowed with frosty formality. ‘Lieutenant Kasper, Lady Ariss.’

Kasper clapped him on the arm, as friendly as ever. His ignorant waif of a cousin smiled uncertainly. The governess frowned at him as he passed, but Jeza! took no notice.



He arrived at the Lords’ Round just as the council members were returning from their lunchtime recess. He acknowledged the guards in the vestibule with a terse nod, then strode through the enormous doorway and down the central aisle. A straggling column of the greatest peers of the realm were hard on his heels, and the echoing space was full of shuffling footsteps, grumblings and whisperings, as Jeza! made his way around the curved wall to his place behind the high table.

‘Jeza!, how was fencing?’ It was Jalenhorm, here early for once, and seizing on the opportunity to talk before the Lord Chamberlain arrived.

‘I’ve had better mornings. Yourself?’

‘Oh, I’ve been having a fine time. I met that cousin of Kasper’s, you know,’ he searched for the name.

Jeza! sighed. ‘Lady Ariss.’

‘Yes, that’s it! Have you seen her?’

‘I was lucky enough to run into them just now.’

‘Phew!’ exclaimed Jalenhorm, pursing his lips. ‘Isn’t she stunning?’

‘Hmm.’ Jezal looked away, bored, and watched the robed and fur-trimmed worthies file slowly to their places. At least he watched a sample of their least favourite sons and paid representatives. Very few of the magnates turned up in person for Open Council these days, not unless they had something significant to complain about. A lot of them didn’t even bother to send someone in their place.

‘I swear, one of the finest-looking girls I ever saw. I know Kaspas always raving about her, but he didn’t do her justice.’

‘Hmm.’ The councillors began to spread out, each man towards his own seat. The Lords’ Round was designed like a theatre, the Union’s leading noblemen sitting where the audience would be, on a great half-circle of banked benches with an aisle down the centre.

As in the theatre, some seats were better than others. The least important sat high up at the back, and the occupants’ significance increased as you came forward. The front row was reserved for the heads of the very greatest families, or whoever they sent in their stead. Representatives from the south, from Dagoska and Westport, were on the left, nearest to Jezal. On the far right were those from the north and west, from Angland and Starikland. The bulk of the seating, in between, was for the old nobility of Midderland, the heart of the Union. The Union proper, as they would have seen it. As Jezal saw it too, for that matter.

‘What poise, what grace,’ Jalenhorm was rhapsodising, ‘that wonderful fair hair, that milky-white skin, those fantastic blue eyes.’

‘And all of that money.’

‘Well yes, that too,’ smiled the big man. ‘Kaspa says his uncle is even richer than his father. Imagine that! And he has just the one child. She will inherit every mark of it. Every mark!’ Jalenhorm could scarcely contain his excitement. ‘It’s a lucky man that can bag her! What was her name again?’

‘Ariss,’ said Jezal sourly. The Lords, or their proxies, had all shuffled and grumbled their way to their seats. It was a poor attendance: the benches were less than half full. That was about as full as it ever got. If the Lords’ Round really had been a theatre, its owners would have been desperately in search of a new play.

‘Ariss. Ariss.’ Jalenhorm smacked his lips as though the name left a sweet taste. ‘It’s a lucky man that gets her.’

‘Yes indeed. A lucky man.’ Providing he prefers cash to conversation, that is. Jezal thought he might have preferred to marry the governess. At least she had seemed to have a bit of backbone.

The Lord Chamberlain had entered the hall now, and was making his way towards the dais on which the high table stood, just about where the stage would have been, had the Round been a theatre. He was followed by a gaggle of black-gowned secretaries and clerks, each man more or less encumbered with heavy books and sheaves of official-looking papers. With his crimson robes of state flapping behind him, Lord Hoff looked like nothing so much as a rare and stately gliding bird, pursued by a flock of troublesome crows.

‘Here comes old vinegar,’ whispered Jalenhorm, as he sidled off to find his place on the other side of the table. Jezal put his hands behind his back and

struck the usual pose, feet a little spread, chin high in the air. He swept an eye over the soldiers, regularly spaced around the curved wall, but each man was motionless and perfectly presented in full armour, as always. He took a deep breath and prepared himself for several hours of the most extreme tedium.

The Lord Chamberlain threw himself into his tall chair and called for wine. The secretaries took their places around him, leaving a space in the centre for the King, who was absent as usual. Documents were rustled, great ledgers were heaved open, pens were sharpened and rattled in ink wells. The Announcer walked to the end of the table and struck his staff of office on the floor for order. The whispering of the noblemen and their proxies, and that of the few attendees in the public gallery over their heads, gradually died down, leaving the vast chamber silent.

The Announcer puffed out his chest. 'I call this meeting,' he said, in slow and sonorous tones, as though he were giving the eulogy at a funeral, 'of the Open Council of the Union . . .' he gave an unnecessarily long and significant pause. The Lord Chamberlain's eyes flicked angrily towards him, but the Announcer was not to be robbed of his moment of glory. He made everyone wait an instant longer before finishing, ' . . . to order!'

'Thank you,' said Hoff sourly. 'I believe we were about to hear from the Lord Governor of Dagoska before we were interrupted by luncheon.' The scratching nibs of quills accompanied his voice, as two clerks recorded his every word. The faint echoes of the pens merged with the echoes of his words in the great space above.

An elderly man struggled to his feet in the front row close to Jezal, some papers clasped before him in shaky hands.

'The Open Council,' droned the Announcer, as ponderously as he dared, 'recognises Rush dan Thuel, accepted proxy of Sand dan Vurms, the Lord Governor of Dagoska!'

'Thank you, sir.' Thuel's cracking, wispy voice was absurdly small in the vast space. It barely carried as far as Jezal, and he was no more than ten strides away. 'My Lords—' he began.

'Speak up!' called someone from the back. There was a ripple of laughter. The old man cleared his throat and tried again.

'My Lords, I come before you with an urgent message from the Lord Governor of Dagoska.' His voice had already faded to its original, barely audible level, each word accompanied by the persistent scratching of quills. Whispers began to emanate from the public gallery above, making it still harder to hear him. 'The threat posed to that great city by the Emperor of Gurkhul increases with every passing day.'

Vague sounds of disapproval began to float up from the far side of the room, where the representatives from Angland were seated, but the bulk of the councillors simply looked bored. 'Attacks on shipping, harassment of traders, and demonstrations beyond our walls, have compelled the Lord Governor to send me—'

'Lucky us!' somebody shouted. There was another wave of laughter, slightly louder this time.

'The city is built on but a narrow peninsula,' persisted the old man, straining to make himself heard over the increasing background noise, 'attached to a

land controlled entirely by our bitter enemies the Gurmish, and separated from Midderland by wide leagues of salt water! Our defences are not all they might be! The Lord Governor is sorely in need of more funds ...'

The mention of funds brought instant uproar from the assembly. Thuel's mouth was still moving, but there was no chance of hearing him now. The Lord Chamberlain frowned and took a swallow from his goblet. The clerk furthest from Jezal had laid down his quill and was rubbing his eyes with his inky thumb and forefinger. The clerk closest had just finished writing a line. Jezal craned forward to see. It said simply:

Some shouting here.

The Announcer thumped his staff on the tiles with a look of great self-satisfaction. The hubbub eventually died down but Thuel had now been taken with a coughing fit. He tried to speak but was unable, and eventually he waved his hand and sat down, very red in the face, while his neighbour thumped him on the back.

'If I may, Lord Chamberlain?' shouted a fashionable young man in the front row on the other side of the hall, leaping to his feet. The scratching of the quills began once again. 'It seems to me—'

'The Open Council,' cut in the Announcer, 'recognises Hersel dan Meed, third son and accepted proxy of Fedor dan Meed, the Lord Governor of Angland!'

'It seems to me,' continued the handsome young man, only slightly annoyed by this interruption, 'that our friends in the south are forever expecting a full-scale attack by the Emperor!' Dissenting voices were now raised on the other side of the room. 'An attack which never materialises! Did we not defeat the Gurmish only a few short years ago, or does my memory deceive me?' The booing increased in volume. 'This scaremongering represents an unacceptable drain on the Union's resources!' He was shouting to be heard. 'In Angland we have many miles of border and too few soldiers, while the threat from Bethod and his Northmen is very real! If anyone is in need of funds ...'

The shouting was instantly redoubled. Cries of 'Hear, hear!', 'Nonsense!', 'True!' and 'Lies!' could be vaguely made out over the hubbub. Several of the representatives were on their feet, shouting. Some vigorously nodded their agreement, some violently shook their heads in dissent. Others yawned and stared around. Jezal could see one fellow, near to the back in the centre, who was almost certainly asleep, and in imminent danger of slumping into his neighbour's lap.

He allowed his eyes to wander up, over the faces ranged around the rail of the public gallery. He felt a strange tugging in his chest. Ardee West was up there, looking straight down at him. As their eyes met she smiled and waved. He was smiling himself, with his arm halfway up to wave, when he remembered where he was. He pushed his arm behind his back and looked around nervously, but was relieved to find that no one important had noticed his mistake. The smile would not quite leave his face though.

'My Lords!' roared the Lord Chamberlain, smashing his empty goblet down on the high table. He had the loudest voice Jezal had ever heard. Even Marshal Varuz could have learned a thing or two about shouting from Hoff. The sleeping man near the back started up, sniffing and blinking. The noise

died away almost immediately. Those representatives left standing looked around guiltily, like naughty children called to account, and gradually sat down. The whispers from the public gallery went still. Order was restored.

'My Lords! I can assure you, the King has no more serious concern than the safety of his subjects, no matter where they are! The Union does not permit aggression against its people or property!' Hoff punctuated each comment by smashing his fist down in front of him. 'From the Emperor of Gurkhul, from these savages in the North, or from anyone else!' He struck the table so hard on this last comment that ink splashed from a well and ran all over one of the clerks' carefully prepared documents. Calls of agreement and support greeted the Lord Chamberlain's patriotic display.

'As for the specific circumstance of Dagoska!' Thuel looked up hopefully, chest still shaking with suppressed coughs. 'Is that city not possessed of some of the most powerful and extensive defences in the world? Did it not resist a siege by the Gurkish, less than a decade ago, for over a year? What has become of the walls, sir, the walls?' The great room fell quiet as everyone strained to hear the reply.

'Lord Chamberlain,' wheezed Thuel, his voice nearly drowned out as one of the clerks turned the crackling page of his huge book and began scratching on the next, 'the defences have fallen into poor repair, and we lack the soldiers to keep them properly manned. The Emperor is not ignorant of this,' he whispered, all but inaudible, 'I beg of you . . .' He dissolved into another fit of coughing, and dropped into his seat, accompanied by some light jeering from the Angland delegation.

Hoff frowned even more deeply. 'It was my understanding that the defences of the city were to be maintained by monies raised locally, and by trade levies upon the Honourable Guild of Spicers, who have operated in Dagoska under an exclusive and highly profitable licence these past seven years. If resources cannot be found even to maintain the walls,' and he swept the assembly with a dark eye, 'perhaps it is time that this licence was put out to tender.' There was a volley of angry mutterings around the public gallery.

'In any case, the Crown can spare no extra monies at present!' Jeers of dissatisfaction came from the Dagoska side of the room, hoots of agreement from the Angland side.

'As for the specific circumstance of Angland!' thundered the Lord Chamberlain, turning toward Meed. 'I believe we may shortly hear some good news, for you to take back to your father the Lord Governor.' A cloud of excited whisperings rose up into the gilded dome above. The handsome young man looked pleasantly surprised, as well he might. It was rare indeed that anyone took good news away from the Open Council, or news of any kind for that matter.

Thuel had got control of his lungs once more, and he opened his mouth to speak, but he was interrupted by a great beating on the huge door behind the high table. The Lords looked up: surprised, expectant. The Lord Chamberlain smiled, in the manner of a magician who has just pulled off an exceptionally difficult trick. He signalled to the guards, the heavy iron bolts were drawn back, and the great, inlaid doors creaked slowly open.

Eight Knights of the Body, encased in glittering armour, faceless behind

high, polished helmets, resplendent in purple cloaks marked on the back with a golden sun, stomped in unison down the steps and took their places to either side of the high table. They were closely followed by four trumpeters, who stepped smartly forward, raised their shining instruments to their lips and blew an ear-splitting fanfare. Jezal gritted his rattling teeth and narrowed his eyes, but eventually the ringing echoes faded. The Lord Chamberlain turned angrily toward the Announcer, who was staring at the new arrivals with his mouth open.

‘Well?’ hissed Hoff.

The Announcer jumped to life. ‘Ah . . . yes of course! My Lords and Ladies, I have the great honour to present . . .’ he paused and took a huge breath, ‘ . . . his Imperial Highness, the King of Angland, of Starikland, and of Middelrand, the Protector of Westport and of Dagoska, his August Majesty, Guslav the Fifth, High King of the Union!’ There was a great rustling noise as every man and woman in the hall shifted from their seats and down onto one knee.

The royal palanquin processed slowly through the doors, carried on the shoulders of six more faceless knights. The King was sitting in a gilded chair on top, propped up on rich cushions and swaying gently from side to side. He was staring about him with the startled expression of a man who went to sleep drunk, and has woken up in an unfamiliar room.

He looked awful. Enormously fat, lolling like a great hill swathed in fur and red silk, head squashed into his shoulders by the weight of the great, sparkling crown. His eyes were glassy and bulging, with huge dark bags hanging beneath, and the pink point of his tongue kept flicking nervously over his pale lips. He had great low jowls and a roll of fat around his neck, in fact his whole face gave the appearance of having slightly melted and started to run down off his skull. Such was the High King of the Union, but Jezal bowed his head a little lower as the palanquin approached, just the same.

‘Oh,’ muttered his August Majesty, as though he had forgotten something, ‘please rise.’ The rustling noise filled the hall again as everybody rose and returned to their seats. The King turned toward Hoff, brow deeply furrowed, and Jezal heard him say, ‘Why am I here?’

‘The Northmen, your Majesty.’

‘Oh yes!’ The King’s eyes lit up. He paused. ‘What about them?’

‘Er . . .’ but the Lord Chamberlain was saved from replying by the opening of the doors on the opposite side of the hall, the ones through which Jezal had first entered. Two strange men strode through and advanced down the aisle.

One was a grizzled old warrior with a scar and a blind eye, carrying a flat wooden box. The other was cloaked and hooded, every feature hidden, and so big that he made the whole hall seem out of proportion. The benches, the tables, even the guards, all suddenly looked like small versions designed for the use of children. As he passed, a couple of the representatives closest to the aisle cringed and shuffled away. Jezal frowned to himself. This hooded giant did not have the look of good news, whatever Lord Hoff might say. Angry and suspicious mutterings filled the echoing dome as the two Northmen took their places on the tiled floor before the high table.

‘Your Majesty,’ said the Announcer, bowing so ridiculously low that he had to support himself with his staff, ‘the Open Council recognises Fenris the

Feared, the envoy of Bethod, King of the Northmen, and his translator, White-Eye Hansul!’

The King was staring off happily towards one of the great windows in the curved wall, utterly oblivious, perhaps admiring the way the light shone through the beautiful stained glass, but he looked suddenly round, jowls vibrating, as the old half-blind warrior addressed him.

‘Your Majesty. I bring brotherly greetings from my master, Bethod, King of the Northmen.’ The Round had fallen very still, and the clerks’ scratching nibs seemed absurdly loud. The old warrior nodded at the great hooded shape beside him with an awkward smile. ‘Fenris the Feared brings an offer from Bethod to yourself. From King to King. From the North to the Union. An offer, and a gift.’ And he raised the wooden box.

The Lord Chamberlain gave a self-satisfied smirk. ‘Speak your offer first.’

‘It is an offer of peace. An endless peace between our two great nations.’ White-Eye bowed again. His manners were impeccable,

Jezal had to admit. Not what one would expect from savages of the cold and distant North. His goodly speech would almost have been enough to put the room at ease, had it not been for the hooded man beside him, looming like a dark shadow.

The King’s face twitched into a weak smile at this mention of peace however. ‘Good,’ he muttered. ‘Excellent. Peace. Capital. Peace is good.’

‘He asks but one small thing in return,’ said White-Eye.

The Lord Chamberlain’s face had turned suddenly dour, but it was too late. ‘He has but to name it,’ said the King, smiling indulgently.

The hooded man stepped forward. ‘Angland,’ he hissed.

There was a moment of stillness, then the hall exploded with noise. There was a gale of disbelieving laughter from the public gallery. Meed was on his feet, red-faced and screaming. Thuel tottered up from his bench, then fell back coughing. Angry bellows were joined by hoots of derision. The King was staring about him with all the dignity of a startled rabbit.

Jezal’s eyes were fixed on the hooded man. He saw a great hand slip out from his sleeve and reach for the clasp on his cloak. He blinked in surprise. Was the hand blue? Or was it just a trick of the light through the stained glass? The cloak dropped to the floor.

Jezal swallowed, his heart thumping loud in his ears. It was like staring at a terrible wound: the more he was revolted, the less he could look away. The laughter died, the shouting died, the great space became terribly still once more.

Fenris the Feared seemed larger yet without his cloak, towering over his cringing translator. Without any doubt, he was the biggest man that Jezal had ever seen, if man he was. His face was in constant, twisted, sneering motion. His bulging eyes twitched and blinked as they stared crazily round at the assembly. His thin lips smiled and grimaced and frowned by turns, never still. But all this seemed ordinary, by comparison with his strangest feature.

His whole left side, from head to toe, was covered in writing.

Crabby runes were scrawled across the left half of his shaven head, across his eyelid, his lips, his scalp, his ear. His huge left arm was tattooed blue with tiny writing, from bulging shoulder to the tips of his long fingers. Even his

bare left foot was covered in strange letters. An enormous, inhuman, painted monster stood at the very heart of the Union's government. Jezal's jaw hung open.

Around the high table there were fourteen Knights of the Body, each man a hard-trained fighter of good blood. There were perhaps forty guardsmen of Jezal's own company around the walls, each one a seasoned veteran. They outnumbered these two Northmen more than twenty to one, and were well armed with the best steel the King's armouries could provide. Fenris the Feared carried no weapon. For all his size and strangeness, he should have been no threat to them.

But Jezal did not feel safe. He felt alone, weak, helpless, and terribly afraid. His skin was tingling, his mouth was dry. He felt a sudden urge to run, and hide, and never come out again.

And this strange effect was not limited to him, or even to those around the high table. Angry laughs turned to shocked gurgles as the painted monster turned slowly around in the centre of the circular floor, flickering eyes running over the crowd. Meed shrank back onto his bench, anger all leached out of him. A couple of worthies on the front row actually scrambled over the backs of their benches and into the row behind. Others looked away, or covered their faces with their hands. One of the soldiers dropped his spear, and it clattered loudly to the floor.

Fenris the Feared turned slowly to the high table, raising his great tattooed fist, opening his chasm of a mouth, a hideous spasm running over his face. 'Angland!' he screamed, louder and more terrible by far than the Lord Chamberlain had ever been. The echoes of his voice bounced off the domed ceiling high above, resounded from the curved walls, filling the great space with piercing sound.

One of the Knights of the Body stumbled back and slipped, his armoured leg clanking against the edge of the high table.

The King shrank back and covered his face with his hand, one terrified eye staring out from between his fingers, crown teetering on his head.

The quill of one of the clerks dropped from his nerveless fingers. The hand of the other moved across the paper by habit while his mouth fell open, scrawling a messy word diagonally through the neat lines of script above.

Angland.

The Lord Chamberlain's face had turned waxy pale. He reached slowly for his goblet, raised it to his lips. It was empty. He placed it carefully back down on the table, but his hand was trembling, and the base rattled on the wood. He paused for a moment, breathing heavily through his nose. 'Plainly, this offer is not acceptable.'

'That is unfortunate,' said White-Eye Hansul, 'but there is still the gift.' Every eye turned towards him. 'In the North we have a tradition. On occasion, when there is bad blood between two clans, when there is the threat of war, champions come forward from each side, to fight for all their people, so that the issue might be decided . . . with only one death.'

He slowly opened the lid of the wooden box. There was a long knife inside, blade polished mirror-bright. 'His Greatness, Bethod, sends the Feared not only as his envoy, but as his champion. He will fight for Angland, if any here

will face him, and spare you a war you will not win.' He held the box up to the painted monster. 'This is my master's gift to you, and there could be none richer . . . your lives.'

Fenris' right hand darted out and snatched the knife from the box. He raised it high, blade flashing in the coloured light from the great windows. The knights should have jumped forward. Jezal should have drawn his sword. All should have rushed to the defence of the King, but nobody moved. Every mouth was agape, every eye fastened on that glinting tooth of steel.

The blade flashed down. Its point drove easily through skin and flesh until it was buried right to the hilt. The point emerged, dripping blood, from the underside of Fenris' own tattooed left arm. His face twitched, but no more than usual. The blade moved grotesquely as he stretched out his fingers, raised his left arm high for all to see. The drops of blood made a steady patter on the floor of the Lords' Round.

'Who will fight me?' he screamed, great cords of sinew bulging from his neck. His voice was almost painful to the ear.

Utter silence. The Announcer, who was closest to the Feared, and already on his knees, swooned and collapsed on his face.

Fenris turned his goggling eyes on the biggest knight before the table, a full head shorter than he was. 'You?' he hissed. The unfortunate man's foot scraped on the floor as he backed away, no doubt wishing he had been born a dwarf.

A puddle of dark blood had spread across the floor beneath Fenris' elbow. 'You?' he snarled at Fedor dan Meed. The young man turned slightly grey, teeth rattling together, no doubt wishing he was someone else's son.

Those blinking eyes swept across the ashen faces on the high table. Jezal's throat constricted as Fenris' eyes met his. 'You?'

'Well I would, but I'm terribly busy this afternoon. Perhaps tomorrow?' The voice hardly sounded like his own. He certainly hadn't meant to say any such thing. But who else's could it be? The words floated confidently, breezily up towards the gilded dome above.

There was scattered laughter, a shout of 'Bravo!' from somewhere at the back, but the eyes of the Feared did not leave Jezal's for an instant. He waited for the sounds to die, then his mouth twisted into a hideous leer.

'Tomorrow then,' he whispered. Jezal's guts gave a sudden painful shift. The seriousness of the situation pressed itself upon him like a ton of rocks. Him? Fight that?

'No.' It was the Lord Chamberlain. He was still pale, but his voice had regained much of its vigour. Jezal took heart, and fought manfully for control of his bowels. 'No!' barked Hoff again. 'There will be no duel here! There is no issue to decide! Angland is a part of the Union, by ancient law!'

White-Eye Hansul chuckled softly. 'Ancient law? Angland is part of the North. Two hundred years ago there were Northmen there, living free. You wanted iron, so you crossed the sea, and slaughtered them and stole their land! It must be, then, that most ancient of laws: that the strong take what they wish from the weak?' His eyes narrowed. 'We have that law also!'

Fenris the Feared ripped the knife from his arm. A few last drops of blood splattered onto the tiles, but that was all. There was no wound on the tattooed

flesh. No mark at all. The knife clattered onto the tiles and lay there in the pool of blood at his feet. Fenris swept the assembly with his bulging, blinking, crazy eyes one last time, then he turned and strode across the floor and up the aisle, Lords and proxies scrambling away down their benches as he approached.

White-Eye Hansul bowed low. 'Perhaps the time will come when you wish that you had accepted our offer, or our gift. You will hear from us,' he said quietly, then he held up three fingers to the Lord Chamberlain. 'When it is time, we will send three signs.'

'Send three hundred if you wish,' barked Hoff, 'but this pantomime is over!'

White-Eye Hansul nodded pleasantly. 'You will hear from us.' And he turned and followed Fenris the Feared out of the Lords' Round. The great doors clapped shut. The quill of the nearest clerk scratched weakly against the paper.

You will hear from us.

Fedor dan Meed turned towards the Lord Chamberlain, jaw locked tight, handsome features contorted with fury. 'And this is the good news you would have me convey to my father?' he screamed. The Open Council erupted. Bellowing, shouting, abuse directed toward anyone and everyone, chaos of the worst kind.

Hoff jumped up, chair toppling over behind him, mouthing angry words, but even he was drowned out by the uproar. Meed turned his back on him and stormed out. Other delegates from the Angland side of the room rose grimly and followed the son of their Lord Governor. Hoff stared after them, livid with anger, mouth working silently.

Jezal watched the King slowly take his hand from his face and lean down toward his Lord Chamberlain. 'When are the Northmen getting here?' he whispered.

The King of the Northmen

Logen breathed in deep, enjoying the unfamiliar feel of the cool breeze on his fresh-shaved jaw, and took in the view. It was the beginning of a clear day. The dawn mist was almost gone, and from the balcony outside Logen's room, high up on the side of one of the towers of the library, you could see for miles. The great valley was spread out before him, split into stark layers. On top was the grey and puffy white of the cloudy sky. Then there was the ragged line of black crags that ringed the lake, and the dim brown suggestion of others beyond. Next came the dark green of the wooded slopes, then the thin, curving line of grey shingle on the beach. All was repeated in the still mirror of the lake below – another, shadowy world, upside down beneath his own.

Logen looked down at his hands, fingers spread out on the weathered stone of the parapet. There was no dirt, no dried blood under his cracked fingernails. They looked pale, soft, pinkish, strange. Even the scabs and scrapes on his knuckles were mostly healed. It was so long since Logen had been clean that he'd forgotten what it felt like. His new clothes were coarse against his skin, robbed of its usual covering of dirt and grease and dry sweat.

Looking out at the still lake, clean and well fed, he felt a different man. For a moment he wondered how this new Logen might turn out, but the bare stone of the parapet stared back at him where his missing finger used to be. That could never heal. He was Ninefingers still, the Bloody-Nine, and always would be. Unless he lost any more fingers. He did smell better though, that had to be admitted.

'Did you sleep well, Master Ninefingers?' Wells was in the doorway, peering out onto the balcony.

'Like a baby.' Logen didn't have the heart to tell the old servant that he'd slept outside. The first night he'd tried the bed, rolling and wriggling, unable to come to terms with the strange comfort of a mattress and the unfamiliar warmth of blankets. Next he'd tried the floor. That had been an improvement. But the air had still seemed close, flat, stale. The ceiling had hung over him, seeming to creep ever lower, threatening to crush him with the weight of stone above. It was only when he'd lain down on the hard flags of the balcony, with his old coat spread over him and just the clouds and the stars above, that sleep had come. Some habits are hard to break.

'You have a visitor,' said Wells.

'Me?'

Malacus Quai's head appeared around the door frame. His eyes were a little less sunken, the bags underneath them a little less dark. There was some colour to his skin, and some flesh on his bones. He no longer looked like a corpse, just gaunt and sick, as he had done when Logen first met him. He guessed that was about as healthy as Quai ever looked.

'Hah!' laughed Logen. 'You survived!'

The apprentice gave a series of tired nods as he shambled across the room. He was swathed in a thick blanket which trailed on the floor and made it difficult for him to walk properly. He shuffled out of the door to the balcony and stood there, sniffing and blinking in the chill morning air.

Logen was more pleased to see him than he'd expected. He clapped him on the back like an old friend, perhaps a little too warmly. The apprentice stumbled, blanket tangled round his feet, and would have fallen if Logen hadn't put out an arm to steady him.

'Still not quite in fighting shape,' muttered Quai, with a weak grin.

'You look a deal better than when I last saw you.'

'So do you. You lost the beard I see, and the smell too. A few less scars and you'd look almost civilised.'

Logen held his hands up. 'Anything but that.'

Wells ducked through the doorway into the bright morning light. He had a roll of cloth and a knife in his hand. 'Could I see your arm, Master Ninefingers?'

Logen had almost forgotten about the cut. There was no new blood on the bandage, and when he unwound it there was a long, red-brown scab underneath, running almost all the way from wrist to elbow, surrounded by fresh pink skin. It hardly hurt any more, just itched. It crossed two other, older scars. One, a jagged grey effort near his wrist, he thought he might have got in the duel with Threetrees, all those years ago. Logen grimaced as he remembered the battering they'd given each other. The second scar, fainter, higher up, he wasn't sure about. Could've come from anywhere.

Wells bent down and tested the flesh round the wound while Quai peered cautiously over his shoulder. 'It's mending well. You're a fast healer.'

'Lots of practice.'

Wells looked up at Logen's face, where the cut on his forehead had already faded to one more pink line. 'I can see. Would it be foolish to advise you to avoid sharp objects in the future?'

Logen laughed. 'Believe it or not, I always did my best to avoid them in the past. But they seem to seek me out, despite my efforts.'

'Well,' said the old servant, cutting off a fresh length of cloth and winding it carefully round Logen's forearm, 'I hope this is the last bandage you ever need.'

'So do I,' said Logen, flexing his fingers. 'So do I.' But he didn't think it would be.

'Breakfast will be ready soon.' And Wells left the two of them alone on the balcony.

They stood there in silence for a moment, then the wind blew up cold from the valley. Quai shivered and pulled his blanket tight around him. 'Out there . . . by the lake. You could have left me. I would have left me.'

Logen frowned. Time was he'd have done it and never given it a second thought, but things change. 'I've left a lot of people, in my time. Reckon I'm sick of that feeling.'

The apprentice pursed his lips and looked out at the valley, the woods, the distant mountains. 'I never saw a man killed before.'

'You're lucky.'

'You've seen a lot of death, then?'

Logen winced. In his youth, he would have loved to answer that very question. He could have bragged, and boasted, and listed the actions he'd been in, the Named Men he'd killed. He couldn't say now when the pride had dried up. It had happened slowly. As the wars became bloodier, as the causes became excuses, as the friends went back to the mud, one by one. Logen rubbed at his ear, felt the big notch that Tul Duru's sword had made, long ago. He could have stayed silent. But for some reason, he felt the need to be honest.

'I've fought in three campaigns,' he began. 'In seven pitched battles. In countless raids and skirmishes and desperate defences, and bloody actions of every kind. I've fought in the driving snow, the blasting wind, the middle of the night. I've been fighting all my life, one enemy or another, one friend or another. I've known little else. I've seen men killed for a word, for a look, for nothing at all. A woman tried to stab me once for killing her husband, and I threw her down a well. And that's far from the worst of it. Life used to be cheap as dirt to me. Cheaper.'

'I've fought ten single combats and I won them all, but I fought on the wrong side and for all the wrong reasons. I've been ruthless, and brutal, and a coward. I've stabbed men in the back, burned them, drowned them, crushed them with rocks, killed them asleep, unarmed, or running away. I've run away myself more than once. I've pissed myself with fear. I've begged for my life. I've been wounded, often, and badly, and screamed and cried like a baby whose mother took her tit away. I've no doubt the world would be a better place if I'd been killed years ago, but I haven't been, and I don't know why.'

He looked down at his hands, pink and clean on the stone. 'There are few men with more blood on their hands than me. None, that I know of. The Bloody-Nine they call me, my enemies, and there's a lot of 'em. Always more enemies, and fewer friends. Blood gets you nothing but more blood. It follows me now, always, like my shadow, and like my shadow I can never be free of it. I should never be free of it. I've earned it. I've deserved it. I've sought it out. Such is my punishment.'

And that was all. Logen breathed a deep, ragged sigh and stared out at the lake. He couldn't bring himself to look at the man beside him, didn't want to see the expression on his face. Who wants to learn he's keeping company with the Bloody-Nine? A man who's wrought more death than the plague, and with less regret. They could never be friends now, not with all those corpses between them.

Then he felt Quai's hand clap him on the shoulder. 'Well, there it is,' he said, grinning from ear to ear, 'but you saved me, and I'm right grateful for it!'

'I've saved a man this year, and only killed four. I'm born again.' And they both laughed for a while, and it felt good.

'So, Malacus, I see you are back with us.'

They turned, Quai stumbling on his blanket and looking a touch sick. The First of the Magi was standing in the doorway, dressed in a long white shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbow. He still looked more like a butcher than a wizard to Logen.

'Master Bayaz . . . er . . . I was just coming to see you,' stuttered Quai.

‘Indeed? How fortunate for us both then, that I have come to you.’ The Magus stepped out onto the balcony. ‘It occurs to me that a man who is well enough to talk, and laugh, and venture out of doors, is doubtless well enough to read, and study, and expand his tiny mind. What would you say to that?’

‘Doubtless ...’

‘Doubtless, yes! Tell me, how are your studies progressing?’

The wretched apprentice looked utterly confused. ‘They have been somewhat . . . interrupted?’

‘You made no progress with Juven’s *Principles of Art* while you were lost in the hills in bad weather?’

‘Er . . . no progress . . . no.’

‘And your knowledge of the histories. Did that develop far, while Master Ninefingers was carrying you back to the library?’

‘Er . . . I must confess . . . it didn’t.’

‘Your exercises and meditations though, surely you have been practising those, while unconscious this past week?’

‘Well, er . . . no, the unconsciousness was . . . er . . .’

‘So, tell me, would you say that you are ahead of the game, so to speak? Or have your studies fallen behind?’

Quai stared down at the floor. ‘They were behind when I left.’

‘Then perhaps then you could tell me where you plan to spend the day?’

The apprentice looked up hopefully. ‘At my desk?’

‘Excellent!’ Bayaz smiled wide. ‘I was about to suggest it, but you have anticipated me! Your keenness to learn does you much credit!’ Quai nodded furiously and hurried towards the door, the hem of his blanket trailing on the flags.

‘Bethod is coming,’ murmured Bayaz. ‘He will be here today.’ Logen’s smile vanished, his throat felt suddenly tight. He remembered their last meeting well enough. Stretched out on his face on the floor of Bethod’s hall at Carleon, beaten and broken and well chained up, dribbling blood into the straw and hoping the end wouldn’t be too long coming. Then, no reason given, they’d let him go. Flung him out the gates with the Dogman, Threetrees, the Weakest and the rest, and told him never to come back. Never. The first time Bethod ever showed a grain of mercy, and the last, Logen didn’t doubt.

‘Today?’ he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

‘Yes, and soon. The King of the Northmen. Hah! The arrogance of him!’ Bayaz glanced sidelong at Logen. ‘He is coming to ask me for a favour, and I would like you to be there.’

‘He won’t like that.’

‘Exactly.’

The world felt colder than before. If Logen never saw Bethod again it would be far too soon. But some things have to be done. It’s better to do them, than to live with the fear of them. That’s what Logen’s father would have said. So he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. ‘I’ll be there.’

‘Excellent. Then there is but one thing missing.’

‘What?’

Bayaz smirked. ‘You need a weapon.’

It was dry in the cellars beneath the library. Dry and dark and very, very

confusing. They'd gone up and down steps, around corners, past doors, taking here or there a turning to the left or right. The place was a warren. Logen hoped he didn't lose sight of the wizard's flickering torch, or he could easily be stuck beneath the library for ever.

'Dry down here, nice and dry,' Bayaz was saying to himself, voice echoing down the passageway and merging with their flapping footfalls. 'There's nothing worse than damp for books.' He pulled up suddenly next to a heavy door. 'Or for weapons.' He gave the door a gentle shove and it swung silently open.

'Look at that! Hasn't been opened for years, but the hinges still move smooth as butter! That's craftsmanship for you! Why does no one care about craftsmanship anymore?' Bayaz stepped over the threshold without waiting for an answer, and Logen followed close behind.

The wizard's torch lit up a long, low hall with walls of rough stone blocks, the far end lost in shadows. The room was lined with racks and shelves, the floor littered with boxes and stands, everything heaped and bursting with a mad array of arms and armour. Blades and spikes and polished surfaces of wood and metal caught the flickering torchlight as Bayaz paced slowly across the stone floor, weaving between the weapons and casting around.

'Quite a collection,' muttered Logen, as he followed the Magus through the clutter.

'A load of old junk mostly, but there should be a few things worth the finding.' Bayaz took a helmet from a suit of ancient, gilded plate armour and looked it over with a frown. 'What do you make of that?'

'I've never been much for armour.'

'No, you don't strike me as the type. All very well on horse-back, I dare say, but it's a pain in the arse when you've a journey to make on foot.' He tossed the helmet back onto its stand, then stood there staring at the armour, lost in thought. 'Once you've got it on, how do you piss?'

Logen frowned. 'Er . . .' he said, but Bayaz was already moving off down the room, and taking the light with him.

'You must have used a few weapons in your time, Master Ninefingers. What's your preference for?'

'I've never really had one,' said Logen, ducking under a rusty halberd leaning out from a rack. 'A champion never knows what he might be called on to fight with.'

'Of course, of course.' Bayaz took up a long spear with a vicious barbed head, and wafted it around a bit. Logen stepped back cautiously. 'Deadly enough. You could keep a man at bay with one of these. But a man with a spear needs a lot of friends, and they all need spears as well.' Bayaz shoved it back on the rack and moved on.

'This looks fearsome.' The Magus took hold of the gnarled shaft of a huge double-bladed axe. 'Shit!' he said as he lifted it up, veins bulging out of his neck. 'It's heavy enough!' He set it down with a thump, making the rack wobble. 'You could kill a man with that! You could cut him clean in half! If he was standing still.'

'This is better,' said Logen. It was a simple, solid-looking sword, in a scabbard of weathered brown leather.

‘Oh, yes indeed. Much, much better. That blade is the work of Kanedias, the Master Maker himself.’ Bayaz handed his torch to Logen and took the long sword from the rack.

‘Has it ever occurred to you, Master Ninefingers, that a sword is different from other weapons? Axes and maces and so forth are lethal enough, but they hang on the belt like dumb brutes.’ He ran an eye over the hilt, plain cold metal scored with faint grooves for a good grip, glinting in the torchlight. ‘But a sword . . . a sword has a voice.’

‘Eh?’

‘Sheathed it has little to say, to be sure, but you need only put your hand on the hilt and it begins to whisper in your enemy’s ear.’ He wrapped his fingers tightly round the grip. ‘A gentle warning. A word of caution. Do you hear it?’

Logen nodded slowly. ‘Now,’ murmured Bayaz, ‘compare it to the sword half drawn.’ A foot length of metal hissed out of the sheath, a single silver letter shining near the hilt. The blade itself was dull, but its edge had a cold and frosty glint. ‘It speaks louder, does it not? It hisses a dire threat. It makes a deadly promise. Do you hear it?’

Logen nodded again, his eye fastened on that glittering edge. ‘Now compare it to the sword full drawn.’ Bayaz whipped the long blade from its sheath with a faint ringing sound, brought it up so that the point hovered inches from Logen’s face. ‘It shouts now, does it not? It screams defiance! It bellows a challenge! Do you hear it?’

‘Mmm,’ said Logen, leaning back and staring slightly cross-eyed at the shining point of the sword.

Bayaz let it drop and slid it gently back into its scabbard, something to Logen’s relief. ‘Yes, a sword has a voice. Axes and maces and so forth are lethal enough, but a sword is a subtle weapon, and suited to a subtle man. You I think, Master Ninefingers, are subtler than you appear.’ Logen frowned as Bayaz held the sword out to him. He had been accused of many things in his life, but never subtlety. ‘Consider it a gift. My thanks for your good manners.’

Logen thought about it a moment. He hadn’t owned a proper weapon since before he crossed the mountains, and he wasn’t keen to take one up again. But Bethod was coming, and soon. Better to have it, and not want it, than to want it, and not have it. Far, far better. You have to be realistic about these things.

‘Thank you,’ said Logen, taking the sword from Bayaz and handing him back the torch. ‘I think.’

A small fire crackled in the grate, and the room was warm, and homely, and comfortable.

But Logen didn’t feel comfortable. He stood by the window, staring down into the courtyard below, nervous and twitchy and scared, like he used to be before a fight. Bethod was coming. He was somewhere out there. On the road through the woods, or passing between the stones, or across the bridge, or through the gate.

The First of the Magi didn’t seem tense. He sat comfortably in his chair, his feet up on the table next to a long wooden pipe, leafing through a small white-bound book with a faint smile on his face. No one had ever looked calmer, and that only made Logen feel worse.

‘Is it good?’ asked Logen.

'Is what good?'

'The book.'

'Oh yes. It is the best of books. It is Juvens' *Principles of Art*, the very cornerstone of my order.' Bayaz waved his free hand at the shelves which covered two walls, and the hundreds of other identical books lined neatly upon them. 'It's all the same. One book.'

'One?' Logen's eyes scanned across the thick, white spines. 'That's a pretty damn long book. Have you read it all?'

Bayaz chuckled. 'Oh yes, many times. Every one of my order must read it, and eventually make their own copy.' He turned the book around, so that Logen could see. The pages were thickly covered with lines of neat, but unintelligible symbols. 'I wrote these, long ago. You should read it too.'

'I'm really not much of a reader.'

'No?' asked Bayaz. 'Shame.' He flicked over the page and carried on.

'What about that one?' There was another book, sat alone on its side on the very top of one of the shelves, a large, black book, scarred and battered-looking. 'That written by this Juvens as well?'

Bayaz frowned up at it. 'No. His brother wrote that.' He got up from his chair, stretched up and pulled it down. 'This is a different kind of knowledge.' He dragged open his desk drawer, slid the black book inside and slammed it shut. 'Best left alone,' he muttered, sitting back down and opening up the *Principles of Art* again.

Logen took a deep breath, put his left hand on the hilt of the sword, felt the cold metal pressing into his palm. The feel of it was anything but reassuring. He let go and turned back to the window, frowning down into the courtyard. He felt his breath catch in his throat.

'Bethod. He's here.'

'Good, good,' muttered Bayaz absently. 'Who does he have with him?'

Logen peered at the three figures in the courtyard. 'Scale,' he said with a scowl. 'And a woman. I don't recognise her. They're dismounting.' Logen licked his dry lips. 'They're coming in.'

'Yes, yes,' murmured Bayaz, 'that is how one gets to a meeting. Try to calm yourself, my friend. Breathe.'

Logen leaned back against the whitewashed plaster, arms folded, and took a deep breath. It didn't help. The hard knot of worry in his chest only pressed harder. He could hear heavy footsteps in the corridor outside. The doorknob turned.

Scale was the first into the room. Bethod's eldest son had always been burly, even as a boy, but since Logen last saw him he'd grown monstrous. His rock of a head seemed almost an afterthought on top of all that brawn, his skull a good deal narrower than his neck. He had a great block of jaw, a flat stub of a nose, and furious, bulging, arrogant little eyes. His thin mouth was twisted in a constant sneer, much like his younger brother Calder's, but there was less guile here and a lot more violence. He had a heavy broadsword on his hip, and his meaty hand was never far from it as he glowered at Logen, oozing malice from every pore.

The woman came next. She was very tall, slender and pale, almost ill-looking. Her slanting eyes were as narrow and cold as Scale's were bulging

and wrathful, and were surrounded with a quantity of dark paint, which made them look narrower and colder still. There were golden rings on her long fingers, golden bracelets on her thin arms, golden chains around her white neck. She swept the room with her frosty blue eyes, each thing she noticed seeming to lift her to new heights of disgust and contempt. First the furniture, then the books, particularly Logen, and Bayaz most of all.

The self-styled King of the Northmen came last, and more magnificent than ever, robed in rich, coloured cloth and rare white furs. He wore a heavy golden chain across his shoulders, a golden circlet round his head, set with a single diamond, big as a bird's egg. His smiling face was more deeply lined than Logen remembered, his hair and beard touched with grey, but he was no less tall, no less vigorous, no less handsome, and he'd gained much of authority and wisdom – of majesty even. He looked every inch a great man, a wise man, a just man. He looked every inch a King. But Logen knew better.

'Bethod!' said Bayaz, warmly, snapping his book shut. 'My old friend! You can hardly imagine what a joy it is to see you again.' He swung his feet off the table, and gestured at the golden chain, the flashing diamond. 'And to see you so hugely advanced in the world! I remember the time was you were happy to visit me alone. But I suppose great men must be attended on, and I see you have brought some . . . other people. Your charming son I know, of course. I see that you've been eating well at least, eh, Scale?'

'*Prince Scale*,' rumbled Bethod's monstrous son, his eyes popping out even more.

'Hmm,' said Bayaz, with an eyebrow raised. 'I have not had the pleasure of meeting your other companion before.'

'I am Caurib.' Logen blinked. The woman's voice was the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. Calming, soothing, intoxicating. 'I am a sorceress,' she sang, tossing her head with a scornful smile. 'A sorceress, from the utmost north.' Logen stood frozen, his mouth half open. His hatred seeped away. They were all friends here. More than friends. He couldn't take his eyes from her, didn't want to. The others in the room had faded. It was as if she was speaking only to him, and the fondest wish of his heart was that she should never stop

But Bayaz only laughed. 'A real sorceress, and you have the golden voice! How wonderful! It's a long time since I heard that one, but it will not serve you here.' Logen shook his head clear and his hatred rushed back in, hot and reassuring. 'Tell me, does one have to study, to become a sorceress? Or is it simply a question of jewellery, and a deal of paint about the face?' Caurib's eyes narrowed to deadly blue slits, but the First of the Magi didn't give her time to speak. 'And from the *utmost* north, imagine that!' He shivered slightly. 'It must be cold up there, this time of year. Rough on the nipples, eh? Have you come to us for the warm weather, or is there something else?'

'I go where my King commands,' she hissed, pointed chin lifting a little higher.

'Your King?' asked Bayaz, staring about the room as though there must be someone else there, hiding in the corner.

'My father is King of the Northmen now!' snarled Scale. He sneered at Logen. 'You should kneel to him, Bloody-Nine!' He sneered at Bayaz. 'And so

should you, old man!

The First of the Magi spread his hands in apology. 'Oh I'm afraid I don't kneel to anyone. Too old for it. Stiffness in the joints, you see.'

Scale's boot thumped heavy on the floor as he began to move forward, a curse half out of his mouth, but his father placed a gentle hand on his arm. 'Come now, my son, there is no need for kneeling here.' His voice was cold and even as freshly fallen snow. 'It is not fitting that we bicker. Are our interests not the same? Peace? Peace in the North? I have come only to ask for your wisdom, Bayaz, as I did in days past. Is it so wrong, to seek the help of an old friend?' No one had ever sounded more genuine, more reasonable, more trustworthy. But Logen knew better.

'But do we not have peace in the North already?' Bayaz leaned back in his chair, hands clasped before him. 'Are the feuds not all ended? Were you not the victor? Do you not have everything you wanted, and more? King of the Northmen, eh? What help could I possibly offer you?'

'I only share my counsel with friends, Bayaz, and you have been no friend to me of late. You turn away my messengers, my son even. You play host to my sworn enemies.' He frowned towards Logen, and his lip curled. 'Do you know what manner of thing this is? The Bloody-Nine? An animal! A coward! An oath-breaker! Is that the kind of company that you prefer?'

Bethod smiled a friendly smile as he turned back to Bayaz, but there was no missing the threat in his words. 'I fear the time has come for you to decide whether you are with me, or against me. There can be no middle ground in this. Either you are a part of my future, or a relic of the past. Yours is the choice, my friend.' Logen had seen Bethod give such choices before. Some men had yielded. The rest had gone back to the mud.

But Bayaz, it seemed, was not to be rushed. 'Which shall it be?' He reached forward slowly and took his pipe from the table. 'The future, or the past?' He strolled over to the fire and squatted down, back turned to his three guests, took a stick from the grate, set it to the bowl, and puffed slowly away. It seemed to take an age for him to get the damn thing lit. 'With, or against?' he mused as he returned to his chair.

'Well?' demanded Bethod.

Bayaz stared up at the ceiling and blew out a thin stream of yellow smoke. Caurib looked the old Magus up and down with icy contempt, Scale twitched with impatience, Bethod waited, eyes a little narrowed. Finally, Bayaz gave a heavy sigh. 'Very well. I am with you.'

Bethod smiled wide, and Logen felt a lurch of terrible disappointment. He had hoped for better from the First of the Magi. Damn foolish, how he never learned to stop hoping.

'Good,' murmured the King of the Northmen. 'I knew you would see my way of thinking, in the end.' He slowly licked his lips, like a hungry man watching good food brought in. 'I mean to invade England.'

Bayaz raised an eyebrow, then he started to chuckle, then he thumped the table with his fist. 'Oh that's good, that's very good! You find peace does not suit your kingdom, eh, Bethod? The clans are not used to being friends, are they? They hate each other and they hate you, am I right?'

'Well,' smiled Bethod, 'they are somewhat restive.'

'I bet they are! But send them to war with the Union, then they will be a nation, eh? United against the common enemy, to be sure. And if you win? You'll be the man who did the impossible! The man who drove the damn southerners out of the North! You'll be loved, or at any rate, more feared than ever. If you lose, well, at least you keep the clans busy a while, and sap their strength in the process. I remember now why I used to like you! An excellent plan!'

Bethod looked smug. 'Of course. And we will not lose. The Union is soft, arrogant, unprepared. With your help—'

'My help?' interrupted Bayaz. 'You presume too much.'

'But you—'

'Oh, that.' The Magus shrugged. 'I am a liar.'

Bayaz lifted his pipe to his mouth. There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Bethod's eyes narrowed. Caurib's widened. Scale's heavy brow crinkled with confusion. Logen's smile slowly returned.

'A liar?' hissed the sorceress. 'And more besides, say I!' Her voice still had the singing note about it, but it was a different song now – hard, shrill, murderous sharp. 'You old worm! Hiding here behind your walls, and your servants, and your books! Your time is long past, fool! You are nothing but words and dust!' The First of the Magi calmly pursed his lips and blew out smoke. 'Words and dust, old worm! Well, we shall see. We will come to your library!' The wizard set his pipe carefully down on the table, a little smoke still curling up out of the bowl. 'We will come back to your library, and put your walls to the hammer, your servants to the sword, and your books to the fire! To the—'

'Silence.' Bayaz was frowning now, deeper even than he had at Calder, days before in the yard outside. Again Logen felt the desire to step away, but stronger by far. He found himself glancing around the room for a place to hide. Caurib's lips still moved, but only a meaningless croak came out.

'Break my walls, would you?' murmured Bayaz. His grey brows drew inwards, deep, hard grooves cutting into the bridge of his nose.

'Kill my servants, will you?' asked Bayaz. The room had turned very chill, despite the logs on the fire.

'Burn my books, say you?' thundered Bayaz. 'You say too much, witch!' Caurib's knees buckled. Her white hand clawed at the door-frame, chains and bangles jingling together as she slumped against the wall.

'Words and dust, am I?' Bayaz thrust up four fingers. 'Four gifts you had of me, Bethod – the sun in winter, a storm in summer, and two things you could never have known, but for my Art. What have you given me in return, eh? This lake and this valley, which were mine already, and but one other thing.' Bethod's eyes flicked across to Logen, then back. 'You owe me still, yet you send messengers to me, you make demands, you presume to *command* me? That is not my idea of manners.'

Scale had caught up now, and his eyes were near popping out of his head. 'Manners? What does a King need with manners? A King takes what he wants!' And he took a heavy step towards the table.

Now Scale was big enough and cruel enough, to be sure. Most likely you could never find a better man for kicking someone once he was down. But

Logen wasn't down, not yet, and he was good and sick of listening to this bloated fool. He stepped forward to block Scale's path, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword. 'Far enough.'

The Prince looked Logen over with his bulging eyes, held up his meaty fist, squeezing his great fingers so the knuckles turned white. 'Don't tempt me Ninefingers, you broken cur! Your day's long past! I could crush you like an egg!'

'You can try it, but I've no mind to let you. You know my work. One step more and I'll set to work on you, you fucking swollen pig.'

'Scale!' snapped Bethod. 'There is nothing for us here, that much is plain. We are leaving.' The hulking prince locked his great lump of a jaw, his huge hands clenching and unclenching by his sides, glowering at Logen with the most bestial hatred imaginable. Then he sneered, and slowly backed away.

Bayaz leaned forward. 'You said you would bring peace to the North, Bethod, and what have you done? You have piled war on war! The land is bled white with your pride and your brutality! King of the Northmen? Hah! You're not worth the helping! And to think, I had such high hopes for you!'

Bethod only frowned, his eyes as cold as the diamond on his forehead. 'You have made an enemy of me, Bayaz, and I am a bad enemy to have. The very worst. You will yet regret this day's work.' He turned his scorn on Logen. 'As for you, Ninefingers, you will have no more mercy from me! Every man in the North will be your enemy now! You will be hated, and hunted, and cursed, wherever you go! I will see to it!'

Logen shrugged. There was nothing new there. Bayaz stood up from his chair. 'You've said your piece, now take your witch and get you gone!'

Caurib stumbled from the room first, still gasping for air.

Scale gave Logen one last scowl, then he turned and lumbered away. The so-called King of the Northmen was the last to leave, nodding slowly and sweeping the room with a deadly glare. As their footsteps faded down the corridor Logen took a deep breath, steadied himself, and let his hand drop from the hilt of the sword.

'So,' said Bayaz brightly, 'that went well.'

A Road Between Two Dentists

Past midnight, and it was dark in the Middleway. Dark and it smelled bad. It always smelled bad down by the docks: old salt water, rotten fish, tar and sweat and horse shit. In a few hours time this street would be thronging with noise and activity. Tradesmen shouting, labourers cursing under their loads, merchants hurrying to and fro, a hundred carts and wagons rumbling over the dirty cobbles. There would be an endless tide of people, thronging off the ships and thronging on, people from every part of the world, words shouted in every language under the sun. But at night it was still. Still and silent. *Silent as the grave, and even worse smelling.*

'It's down here,' said Severard, strolling towards the shadowy mouth of a narrow alley, wedged in between two looming warehouses.

'Did he give you much trouble?' asked Glokta as he shuffled painfully after.

'Not too much.' The Practical adjusted his mask, letting some air in behind. *Must get very clammy under there, all that breath and sweat. No wonder Practicals tend to have bad tempers.* 'He gave Rews' mattress some trouble, stabbed it all to bits. Then Frost knocked him on the head. Funny thing. When that boy knocks a man on the head, the trouble all goes out of him.'

'What about Rews?'

'Still alive.' The light from Severard's lamp passed over a pile of putrid rubbish. Glokta heard rats squeaking in the darkness as they scurried away.

'You know all the best neighbourhoods, don't you Severard?'

'That's what you pay me for, Inquisitor.' His dirty black boot squelched, heedless, into the stinking mush. Glokta limped gingerly around it, holding the hem of his coat up in his free hand. 'I grew up round here,' continued the Practical. 'Folk don't ask questions.'

'Except for us.' *We always have questions.*

'Course.' Severard gave a muffled giggle. 'We're the Inquisition.' His lamp picked out a dented iron gate, the high wall above topped with rusty spikes. 'This is it.' *Indeed, and what an auspicious-looking address it is.* The gate evidently didn't see much use, its brown hinges squealed in protest as the Practical unlocked it and heaved it open. Glokta stepped awkwardly over a puddle that had built up in a rut in the ground, cursing as his coat trailed in the foul water.

The hinges screamed again as Severard wrestled the heavy gate shut, forehead creasing with the effort, then he lifted the hood on his lantern, lighting up a wide ornamental courtyard, choked with rubble and weeds and broken wood.

'And here we are,' said Severard.

It must once have been a magnificent building, in its way. *How much would all those windows have cost? How much all that decorative stonework? Visitors must have been awed by its owner's wealth, if not his good taste.* But no more. The

windows were blinded with rotting boards, the swirls of masonry were choked with moss and caked with bird droppings. The thin layer of green marble on the pillars was cracked and flaking, exposing the rotten plaster underneath. All was crumbled, broken and decayed. Fallen lumps of the façade were strewn everywhere, casting long shadows on the high walls of the yard. Half the head of a broken cherub stared mournfully up at Glokta as he limped past.

He had been expecting some dingy warehouse, some dank cellar near the water. 'What is this place?' he asked, staring up at the rotting palace.

'Some merchant built it, years ago.' Severard kicked a lump of broken sculpture out of his way and it clattered off into the darkness. 'A rich man, very rich. Wanted to live near his warehouses and his wharves, keep one eye on business.' He strolled up the cracked and mossy steps to the huge, flaking front door. 'He thought the idea might catch on, but how could it? Who'd want to live round here if they didn't have to? Then he lost all his money, as merchants do. His creditors have had trouble finding a buyer.'

Glokta stared at a broken fountain, leaning at an angle and half filled with stagnant water. 'Hardly surprising.'

Severard's lamp barely lit the cavernous space of the entrance hall. Two enormous, curved, slumping staircases loomed out of the gloom opposite them. A wide balcony ran around the walls at first floor level, but a great section of it had collapsed and crashed through the damp floorboards below, so that one of the stairways ended, amputated, hanging in the empty air. The damp floor was strewn with lumps of broken plaster, fallen roofing slates, shattered timbers and a spattering of grey bird droppings. The night sky peered in through several yawning holes in the roof. Glokta could hear the vague sound of pigeons cooing in amongst the shadowy rafters, and somewhere the slow dripping of water.

What a place. Glokta stifled a smile. It reminds me of myself, in a way. We both were magnificent once, and we both have our best days far behind us.

'It's big enough, wouldn't you say?' asked Severard, picking his way in amongst the rubble towards a yawning doorway under the broken staircase, his lamp casting strange, slanting shadows as he moved.

'Oh, I'd have thought so, unless we get more than a thousand prisoners at once.' Glokta shuffled after him, leaning heavily on his cane, worried about his footing on the slimy floor. *I'll slip and fall right on my arse, right here in all this bird shit. That would be perfect.*

The arch opened into a crumbling hall, rotten plaster falling away in sheets, showing the damp bricks beneath. Gloomy doorways passed by on either side. *The sort of place that would make a man nervous, if he was prone to nervousness. He might imagine unpleasant things in these chambers, just beyond the lamp light, and horrible acts taking place in the darkness.* He looked up at Severard, ambling jauntily along in front, tuneless whistling vaguely audible from behind his mask, and frowned. *But we are not prone to nervousness. Perhaps we are the unpleasant things. Perhaps the acts are ours.*

'How big is this place?' asked Glokta as he hobbled along.

'Thirty-five rooms, not counting the servant's quarters.'

'A palace. How the hell did you find it?'

'I used to sleep here, some nights. After my mother died. I found a way in.'

The roof was still mostly on back then, and it was a dry place to sleep. Dry and safe. More or less.' *Ah, what a hard life it's been. Thug and torturer is a real step up for you, isn't it?*

Every man has his excuses, and the more vile the man becomes, the more touching the story has to be. What is my story now, I wonder?

'Ever resourceful, eh, Severard?'

'That's what you pay me for, Inquisitor.'

They passed into a wide space: a drawing room, a study, a ball-room even, it was big enough. Once beautiful panels were sagging from the walls, covered in mould and flaking gilt paint. Severard moved over to one, still attached, and pushed it firmly at one side. There was a soft click as it swung open, revealing a dark archway beyond. *A hidden door? How delightful. How sinister. How very appropriate.*

'This place is as full of surprises as you are,' said Glokta, limping painfully towards the opening.

'And you wouldn't believe the price I got.'

'We bought this?'

'Oh no. I did. With Rews' money. And now I'm renting it to you.' Severard's eyes sparkled in the lamplight. 'It's a gold mine!'

'Hah!' laughed Glokta, as he shuffled carefully down the steps. *All this, and a head for business too. Perhaps I'll be working for Arch Lector Severard one of these days. Stranger things have happened.* Glokta's shadow loomed out ahead of him into the darkness as he laboured crab-like down the steps, his right hand feeling out the gaps between the rough stone blocks to lend him some support.

'The cellars go on for miles,' muttered Severard from behind. 'We have our own private access to the canals, and to the sewers too, if you're interested in sewers.' They passed a dark opening on their left, then another on their right, always going slowly downwards. 'Frost tells me you can get all the way from here to the Agriont, without once coming up for air.'

'That could be useful.'

'I'd say so, if you can stand the smell.'

Severard's lamp found a heavy door with a small, barred opening. 'Home again,' he said, and gave four quick knocks. A moment later Practical Frost's masked face loomed abruptly out of the darkness at the little window. 'Only us.' The albino's eyes showed no sign of warmth or recognition. *But then they never do.* Heavy bolts slid back on the other side of the door, and it swung smoothly open.

There was a table and chair, and fresh torches on the walls, but they were unlit. *It must have been pitch black in here until our little lamp arrived.* Glokta looked over at the albino. 'Have you just been sitting here in the dark?' The hulking Practical shrugged, and Glokta shook his head. 'Sometimes I worry about you, Practical Frost, I really do.'

'He's down here,' said Severard, ambling off down the hall, heels making clicking echoes on the stone flags of the floor. This must once have been a wine cellar: there were several barrel-vaulted chambers leading off to either side, sealed with heavy gratings.

'Glokta!' Salem Rews' fingers were gripped tightly round the bars, his face pressed up between them.

Glokta stopped in front of the cell and rested his throbbing leg. 'Rews, how are you? I hardly expected to see you again so soon.' He had lost weight already, his skin was slack and pale, still marked with fading bruises. *He does not look well, not well at all.*

'What's happening. Glokta? Please, why am I here?'

Well, where's the harm? 'It seems the Arch Lector still has a use for you. He wants you to give evidence.' Glokta leaned towards the bars. 'Before the Open Council,' he whispered.

Rews grew paler still. 'Then what?'

'We'll see.' *Angland, Rews, Angland.*

'What if I refuse?'

'Refuse the Arch Lector?' Glokta chuckled. 'No, no, no, Rews. You don't want to do a thing like that.' He turned away and shuffled after Severard.

'For pity's sake! It's dark down here!'

'You'll get used to it!' Glokta called over his shoulder. *Amazing, what one can get used to.*

The last of the chambers held their latest prisoner. Chained up to a bracket in the wall, naked and bagged of course. He was short and stocky, tending slightly to fat, with fresh grazes on his knees, no doubt from being flung into the rough stone cell.

'So this is our killer, eh?' The man rolled himself up onto his knees when he heard Glokta's voice, straining forward against his chains. A little blood had soaked through the front of the bag and dried there, making a brown stain on the canvas.

'A very unsavoury character indeed,' said Severard. 'Doesn't look too fearsome now, though, does he?'

'They never do, once they're brought to this. Where do we work?'

Severard's eyes smiled even more. 'Oh, you're going to like this, Inquisitor.'

'It's a touch theatrical,' said Glokta, 'but none the worse for that.'

The room was large and circular with a domed ceiling, painted with a curious mural that ran all the way round the curved walls. The body of a man lay on the grass, bleeding from many wounds, with a forest behind him. Eleven other figures walked away, six on one side, five on the other, painted in profile, awkwardly posed, dressed in white but their features indistinct. They faced another man, arms stretched out, all in black and with a sea of colourfully daubed fire behind him. The harsh light from six bright lamps didn't make the work look any better. *Hardly of the highest quality, more decoration than art, but the effect is quite striking, nonetheless.*

'No idea what it's supposed to be,' said Severard.

'The Mather Ma'er,' mumbled Practical Frost.

'Of course,' said Glokta, staring up at the dark figure on the wall, and the flames behind. 'You should study your history, Practical Severard. This is the Master Maker, Kanedias.' He turned and pointed to the dying man on the opposite wall. 'And this is great Juvens, whom he has killed.' He swept his hand over the figures in white. 'And these are Juvens' apprentices, the Magi, marching to avenge him.' *Ghost stories, fit to scare children with.*

'What kind of man pays to have shit like this on the walls of his cellar?' asked Severard, shaking his head.

‘Oh, this sort of thing was quite popular at one time. There’s a room painted like this in the palace. This is a copy, and a cheap one.’ Glokta looked up at the shadowed face of Kanedias, staring grimly down into the room, and the bleeding corpse on the opposite wall. ‘Still, there’s something quite unsettling about it, isn’t there?’ *Or there would be, if I gave a damn.* ‘Blood, fire, death, vengeance. No idea why you’d want it in the cellar. Perhaps there was something dark about our friend the merchant.’

‘There’s always something dark about a man with money,’ said Severard. ‘Who are these two?’

Glokta frowned, peering forward. Two small, vague figures could be seen under the arms of the Maker, one on each side. ‘Who knows?’ asked Glokta, ‘maybe they’re his Practicals.’

Severard laughed. A vague exhalation of air even came from behind Frost’s mask, though his eyes showed no sign of amusement. *My, my, he must be thoroughly tickled.*

Glokta shuffled toward the table in the centre of the room. Two chairs faced each other across the smooth, polished surface. One was a spare, hard affair of the sort you found in the cellars of the House of Questions, but the other was altogether more impressive, throne-like almost, with sweeping arms and a high back, upholstered in brown leather.

Glokta placed his cane against the table and lowered himself carefully, back aching. ‘Oh, this is an excellent chair,’ he breathed, sinking slowly back into the soft leather, stretching out his leg, throbbing from the long walk here. There was a slight resistance. He looked beneath the table. There was a matching footstool there.

Glokta tipped his head back and laughed. ‘Oh this is fine! You shouldn’t have!’ He settled his leg down on the stool with a comfortable sigh.

‘It was the least we could do,’ said Severard, folding his arms and leaning against the wall next to the bleeding body of Juvens. ‘We did well from your friend Rews, very well. You’ve always seen us right, and we don’t forget that.’

‘Unhhh,’ said Frost, nodding his head.

‘You spoil me.’ Glokta stroked the polished wood on the arm of the chair. *My boys. Where would I be without you? Back home in bed with mother fussing over me, I suppose, wondering how she’ll ever find a nice girl to marry me now.* He glanced over the instruments on the table. His case was there, of course, and a few other things, well-used, but still highly serviceable. A pair of long-handled tongs particularly caught his eye. He glanced up at Severard. ‘Teeth?’

‘Seemed a good place to start.’

‘Fair enough.’ Glokta licked at his own empty gums then cracked his knuckles, one by one. ‘Teeth, it is.’

As soon as the gag was off the assassin started screaming at them in Styrian, spitting and cursing, struggling pointlessly at his chains. Glokta didn’t understand a word of it. *But I think I catch the meaning, more or less. Something very offensive indeed, I imagine. Something about our mothers, and so on. But I am not easily offended.* He was a rough looking sort, face pockmarked with acne scars, nose broken more than once and bent out of shape. *How disappointing. I was hoping the Mercers might have gone up-market on this occasion at least, but that’s merchants for you. Always looking for the bargain.*

Practical Frost ended the torrent of unintelligible abuse by punching the man heavily in the stomach. *That'll take his breath away for a moment. Long enough to get the first word in.*

'Now then,' said Glokta, 'we'll have none of that nonsense here. We know you're a professional, sent to blend in and do a job. You wouldn't blend in too well if you couldn't even speak the language, now would you?'

The prisoner had got his breath back. 'Pox on all of you, you bastards!' he gasped.

'Excellent! The common tongue will do nicely for our little chats. I have a feeling we may end up having several. Is there anything you would like to know about us before we begin? Or shall we get straight to it?'

The prisoner stared up suspiciously at the painted figure of the Master Maker, looming over Glokta's head. 'Where am I?'

'We're just off the Middleway, down near the water.' Glokta winced as the muscles in his leg suddenly convulsed. He stretched it out cautiously, waiting until he heard the knee click before he carried on. 'You know, the Middleway is one of the very arteries of the city, it runs straight through its heart, from the Agriont to the sea. It passes through many different districts, has all manner of notable buildings. Some of the most fashionable addresses in the whole city are just up the lane. To me though, it's nothing but a road between two dentists.'

The prisoner's eyes narrowed, then darted over the instruments on the table. *But no more cursing. It seems the mention of dentistry has got his attention.*

'Up at the other end of the avenue,' and Glokta pointed roughly northwards, 'in one of the most expensive parts of town, opposite the public gardens, in a beautiful white house in the very shadow of the Agriont, is the establishment of Master Farrad. You might have heard of him?'

'Get fucked!'

Glokta raised his eyebrows. *If only.* 'They say that Master Farrad is the finest dentist in the world. I believe he came from Gurkhul originally, but he escaped the tyranny of the Emperor to join us in the Union and make a better life for himself, saving our wealthiest citizens from the terrors of bad teeth. When I came back from my own little visit to the South, my family sent me to him, to see if there was anything he could do for me.' Glokta smiled wide, showing the assassin the nature of the problem. 'Of course there wasn't. The Emperor's torturers saw to that. But he's a damn fine dentist, everyone says so.'

'So what?'

Glokta let his smile fade. 'Down at the other end of the Middleway, down near the sea, in amongst the filth and the scum and the slime of the docks, am I. The rents may be cheap hereabouts, but I feel confident that, once we have spent some time together, you will not think me any less talented than the esteemed Master Farrad. It is simply that my talents lie in a different direction. The good Master eases the pain of his patients, while I am a dentist . . .' and Glokta leaned slowly forward ' . . . of a different sort.'

The assassin laughed in his face. 'Do you think you can scare me with a bag on the head and a nasty painting?' He looked round at Frost and Severard. 'You crowd of freaks?'

‘Do I think we scare you? The three of us?’ Glokta allowed himself a chuckle at that. ‘Here you sit, alone, unarmed and thoroughly restrained. Who knows where you are but us, or cares to know? You have no hope of deliverance, or of escape. We’re all professionals here. I think you can guess what’s coming, more or less.’ Glokta grinned a sickly grin. ‘Of course we scare you, don’t play the fool. You hide it well, I’ll admit, but that can’t last. The time will come, soon enough, when you’ll be begging to go back in the bag.’

‘You’ll get nothing from me,’ growled the assassin, staring him straight in the eye. ‘Nothing.’ *Tough. A tough man. But it’s easy to act tough before the work begins. I should know.*

Glokta rubbed his leg gently. The blood was flowing nicely now, the pain almost gone. ‘We’ll keep it simple to begin with. Names, that’s all I want, for now. Just names. Why don’t we start with yours? At least you can’t tell us you don’t know the answer.’

They waited. Severard and Frost stared down at the prisoner, the green eyes smiling, the pink ones not. Silence.

Glokta sighed. ‘Right then.’ Frost planted his fists on either side of the assassin’s jaw, started to squeeze until his teeth were forced apart. Severard shoved the ends of the tongs in between and forced his jaws open, much too wide for comfort. The assassin’s eyes bulged. *Hurts, doesn’t it? But that’s nothing, believe me.*

‘Watch his tongue,’ said Glokta, ‘we want him talking.’

‘Don’t worry,’ muttered Severard, peering into the assassin’s mouth. He ducked back suddenly. ‘Ugh! His breath smells like shit!’

A shame, but I am hardly surprised. Clean living is rarely a priority for hired killers. Glokta got slowly to his feet, limped round the table. ‘Now then,’ he murmured, one hand hovering over his instruments, ‘where to begin?’ He picked up a mounted needle and craned forward, his other hand gripped tight around the top of his cane, probing carefully at the killer’s teeth. *Not a pretty set, to be sure. I do believe I’d rather have my teeth than his.*

‘Dear me, these are in a terrible state. Rotten through and through. That’s why your breath stinks so badly. There’s no excuse for it, a man of your age.’

‘Haah!’ yelped the prisoner as Glokta touched a nerve. He tried to speak, but with the tongs in place he made less sense than Practical Frost.

‘Quiet now, you’ve had your chance to talk. Perhaps you’ll get another later, I haven’t decided.’ Glokta put the needle back down on the table, shaking his head sadly. ‘Your teeth are a fucking disgrace. Revolting. I do declare, they’re just about falling out on their own. Do you know,’ he said, as he took the little hammer and chisel from the table, ‘I do believe you’d be better off without them.’

Flatheads

Grey morning time, out in the cold, wet woods, and the Dogman was just sat there, thinking about how things used to be better. Sat there, minding the spit, turning it round every once in a while and trying not to get too nervous with the waiting. Tul Duru wasn't helping any with that. He was striding up and down the grass, round the old stones and back, wearing his great boots out, about as patient as a wolf on heat. Dogman watched him stomping – clomp, clomp, clomp. He'd learned a long time ago that great fighters are only good for one thing. Fighting. At pretty much everything else, and at waiting in particular, they're fucking useless.

'Why don't you sit yourself down, Tul?' muttered Dogman. 'There's stones aplenty for the purpose. Warmer here by the fire and all. Rest those flapping feet o' yours, you're getting me twitchy.'

'Sit me down?' rumbled the giant, coming up and looming over the Dogman like a great bloody house. 'How can I sit, or you either?' He frowned across the ruins and into the trees from under his great, heavy brows. 'You sure this is the place?'

'This is the place.' Dogman stared round at the broken stones, hoping like hell that it was. He couldn't deny there was no sign of 'em yet. 'They'll be here, don't you worry.' So long as they ain't all got themselves killed, he thought, but he had the sense not to say it. He'd spent enough time marching with Tul Duru Thunderhead to know – you don't get that man stirred up. Unless you want a broken head, o' course.

'They better be here soon is all.' Tul's bloody great hands curled up into fists fit to break rocks with. 'I got no taste for just sitting here, arse in the wind!'

'Nor do I, neither,' said the Dogman, showing his palms and doing his best to keep everything gentle, 'but don't you fret on it, big lad. They'll be along soon enough, just the way we planned. This is the place.' He eyed the hog crackling away, dripping some nice gravy in the fire. His mouth was watering good now, his nose was full of the smell of meat . . . and something else beside. Just a whiff. He looked up, sniffing.

'You smell something?' asked Tul, peering into the woods.

'Something, maybe.' The Dogman leaned down and took a hold on his bow.

'What is it? Shanka?'

'Not sure, could be.' He sniffed the air again. Smelled like a man, and a mighty sour-smelling one at that.

'I could have killed the fucking pair o' you!'

Dogman span about, half falling over and near fumbling his bow while he did it. Black Dow wasn't ten strides behind him, down wind, creeping over to the fire with a nasty grin. Grim was at his shoulder, face blank as a wall, as always.

'You bastards!' bellowed Tul. 'You near made me shit with your sneaking

around!’

‘Good,’ sneered Dow. ‘You could lose some fucking lard.’

Dogman took a long breath and tossed his bow back down. Some relief to know they were in the right spot after all, but he could’ve done without the scare. He’d been jumpy since he saw Logen go over the edge of that cliff. Roll right on over and not a thing anyone could do about it. Could happen to anyone any time, death, and that was a fact.

Grim clambered over the broken stones and sat himself down on one next to the Dogman, gave him the barest of nods. ‘Meat?’ barked Dow, shoving past Tul and flopping down beside the fire, ripping a leg off the carcass and tearing into it with his teeth.

And that was it. That was all the greeting, after a month or more apart. ‘A man with friends is rich indeed,’ muttered the Dogman out the corner of his mouth.

‘Whatsay?’ spat Dow, cold eyes sliding round, his mouth full of pig, his dirty, stubbly chin all shiny with grease.

Dogman showed his palms again. ‘Nothing to take offence at.’ He’d spent enough time marching with Black Dow to know – you might as well cut your own neck as make that evil bastard angry. ‘Any trouble while we was split up?’ he asked, looking to change the subject.

Grim nodded. ‘Some.’

‘Fucking Flatheads!’ snarled Dow, spraying bits of meat in Dogman’s face. ‘They’re bloody everywhere!’ He pointed the hog’s leg across the fire like it was a blade. ‘I’ve taken enough of this shit! I’m going back south. It’s too bloody cold by half, and fucking Flatheads everywhere! Bastards! I’m going south!’

‘You scared?’ asked Tul.

Dow turned to look up at him with a big yellow grin, and the Dogman winced. It was a damn fool of a question, that. He’d never been scared in his life, Black Dow. Didn’t know what it was to be scared. ‘Feared of a few Shanka? Me?’ He gave a nasty laugh. ‘We done some work on them, while you two been snoring. Gave some of ’em warm beds to sleep in. Too warm by half.’

‘Burned ’em,’ muttered Grim. That was a full day’s talk out of him already.

‘Burned a whole fucking pile of ’em,’ hissed Dow, grinning like he never heard such a joke as corpses on fire. ‘They don’t scare me, big lad, no more’n you do, but I don’t plan to sit here waiting for ’em neither, just so Threetrees has time to haul his flabby old arse out of bed. I’m going south!’ And he tore off another mouthful of meat.

‘Who’s got the flabby arse now?’

Dogman cracked a grin as he saw Threetrees striding over towards the fire, and he started up and grabbed the old boy by the hand. He had Forley the Weakest with him and all, and Dogman clapped the little man on the back as he came past. Nearly knocked him over, he was that pleased to see they were all alive and made it through another month. Didn’t hurt to have some leadership round the fire, neither. Everyone looked happy for once, smiling and pressing hands and all the rest. Everyone but Dow, o’ course. He just sat there, staring at the fire, sucking on his bone, face sour as old milk.

‘Right good to see you again, lads, and all in one piece.’ Threetrees hefted

his big round shield off his shoulder and leant it up against a broken old bit of wall. 'How've you been?'

'Fucking cold,' said Dow, not even looking up. 'We're going south.'

Dogman sighed. Back together for ten heartbeats and the bickering was already started. It was going to be a tough crowd now, without Logen to keep things settled. A tough crowd, and apt to get bloody. Threetrees wasn't rushing into anything, though. He took a moment to think on it, like always. He loved to take his moment, that one. That was what made him so dangerous. 'Going south, eh?' said Threetrees, after he'd chewed it over for a minute. 'And just when did all this get decided?'

'Nothing's decided,' said the Dogman, showing his palms one more time. He reckoned he might be doing that a lot from now on.

Tul Duru frowned down at Dow's back. 'Nothing at all,' he rumbled, mightily annoyed at having his mind made up for him.

'Nothing is right,' said Threetrees, slow and steady as the grass growing. 'I don't recall this being no voting band.'

Dow took no time at all to think about that. He never took time, that one. That was what made *him* so dangerous. He leaped up, flinging the bone onto the ground, squaring up to Threetrees with a fighting look. 'I . . . say . . . south!' he snarled, eyes bulging like bubbles on a stew.

Threetrees didn't back down a step. That wouldn't have been his way at all. He took his moment to think on it, course, then he took a step forward of his own, so his nose and Dow's were almost touching. 'If you wanted a say, you should have beaten Ninefingers,' he growled, 'instead of losing like the rest of us.'

Black Dow's face turned dark as tar at that. He didn't like being reminded of losing. 'The Bloody-Nine's gone back to the mud!' he snarled. 'Dogman seen it, didn't you?'

Dogman had to nod. 'Aye,' he muttered.

'So that's the end of that! There's no reason for us to be pissing around here, North of the mountains, with Flatheads crawling up our arses! I say south!'

'Ninefingers may be dead,' said Threetrees in Dow's face, 'but your debt ain't. Why he saw fit to spare a man as worthless as you I'll never know, but he named me as second,' and he tapped his big chest, 'and that means I'm the one with the say! Me and no other!'

Dogman took a careful step back. The two of 'em were shaping up for blows alright, and he'd no wish to get a bloody nose in all the confusion. It would hardly have been the first time. Forley took a stab at keeping the peace. 'Come on boys,' he said, all nice and soft, 'there's no need for this.' He might not have been much at killing, Forley, but he was a damn good boy for stopping those that were from killing each other. Dogman wished him luck with it. 'Come on, why don't you—'

'Shut your fucking hole, you!' growled Dow, one dirty finger stabbing savage in Forley's face. 'What's your fucking say worth, Weakest?'

'Leave him be!' rumbled Tul, holding his great fist up under Dow's chin, 'or I'll give you something to shout about!'

The Dogman could hardly look. Dow and Threetrees were always picking at each other. They got fired up quick and damped down quick. The

Thunderhead was a different animal. Once that big ox got properly riled there was no calming him. Not without ten strong men and a lot of rope. Dogman tried to think what Logen would have done. He'd have known how to stop 'em fighting, if he hadn't been dead.

'Shit!' shouted Dogman, jumping up from the fire all of a sudden. 'There's fucking Shanka crawling all over us! And if we get through with them there's always Bethod to think on! We've a world full of scores to settle without making more ourselves! Logen's gone and Threetrees is second, and that's the only say I'll hear!' He did some jabbing with his own finger, at no one in particular, then he waited, hoping like hell that it had done the trick.

'Aye,' grunted Grim.

Forley started nodding like a woodpecker. 'Dogman's right! We need to fight each other like we need the cock-rot! Threetrees is second. He's the chief now.'

It was quiet for a moment, and Dow fixed the Dogman with that cold, empty, killing look, like the cat with the mouse between its paws. Dogman swallowed. A lot of men, most men even, wouldn't have dared meet no look like that from Black Dow. He got the name from having the blackest reputation in the North, with coming sudden in the black of night, and leaving the villages behind him black from fire. That was the rumour. That was the fact.

It took all the bones Dogman had not to stare at his boots. He was just ready to do it when Dow looked away, eyed the others, one at a time. Most men wouldn't have met that look, but these here weren't most men. You could never have hoped to meet a bloodier crowd, not anywhere under the sun. Not a one of them backed down, or even seemed to consider it. Apart from Forley the Weakest, of course, he was staring at the grass before his turn even came.

Once Dow saw they were all against him he cracked a happy smile, just as if there never was a problem. 'Fair enough,' he said to Threetrees, the anger all seeming to drain away in an instant. 'What's it to be then, chief?'

Threetrees looked over at the woods. He sniffed and sucked at his teeth. He scratched at his beard, taking his moment to think on it. He looked each one of them over, considering. 'We go south,' he said.

He smelled 'em before he saw 'em, but that was always the way with him. He had a good nose, did the Dogman, that's how he got the name after all. Being honest though, anyone could have smelled 'em. They fucking stank.

There were twelve down in the clearing. Sitting, eating, grunting to each other in their nasty, dirty tongue, big yellow teeth sticking out everywhere, dressed in lumps of smelly fur and reeking hide and odd bits of rusty armour. Shanka.

'Fucking Flatheads,' Dogman muttered to himself. He heard a soft hiss behind, turned round to see Grim peering up from behind a bush. He held out his open hand to say stop, tapped the top of his skull to say Flatheads, held up his fist, then two fingers to say twelve, and pointed back down the track towards the others. Grim nodded and faded away into the woods.

The Dogman took one last look at the Shanka, just to make sure they were all still unwary. They were, so he slipped back down the tree and off.

'They're camped round the road, twelve that I saw, maybe more.'

'They looking for us?' asked Threetrees.

'Maybe, but they ain't looking too hard.'

'Could we get around them?' asked Forley, always looking to miss out on a fight.

Dow spat onto the ground, always looking to get into one. 'Twelve is nothing! We can do them alright!'

The Dogman looked over at Threetrees, thinking it out, taking his moment. Twelve wasn't nothing, and they all knew it, but it might be better to deal with them than leave them free and easy behind.

'What's it to be, chief?' asked Tul.

Threetrees set his jaw. 'Weapons.'

A fighting man's a fool that don't keep his weapons clean and ready. Dogman had been over his no more'n an hour before. Still, you won't be killed for checking 'em, while you might be for not doing it.

There was the hissing of steel on leather, the clicking of wood and the clanking of metal. Dogman watched Grim twang at his bowstring, check over the feathers on his shafts. He watched Tul Duru run his thumb down the edge of his big heavy sword, almost as tall as Forley was, clucking like a chicken at a spot of rust. He watched Black Dow rubbing a rag on the head of his axe, looking at the blade with eyes soft as a lover's. He watched Threetrees tugging at the buckles on his shield straps, swishing his blade through the air, bright metal glinting.

The Dogman gave a sigh, pulled the straps on his guard tighter round his left wrist, checked the wood of his bow for cracks. He made sure all his knives were where they should be. You can never have too many knives, Logen had told him once, and he'd taken it right to heart. He watched Forley checking his short-sword with clumsy hands, his mouth chewing away, eyes all wet with fear. That got his own nerves jumping, and he glanced round at the others. Dirty, scarred, frowns and lots of beard. There was no fear there, no fear at all, but that was nothing to be shamed at. Different men have different ways, Logen had told him once, and you have to have fear to have courage. He'd taken that right to heart as well.

He walked over to Forley and gave him a clap on the shoulder. 'You have to have fear to have courage,' he said.

'That so?'

'So they say, and it's a good thing too.' The Dogman leaned close so no one else could hear. 'Cause I'm about ready to shit.' He reckoned that's what Logen would have done, and now that Logen had gone back to the mud it fell to him. Forley gave half a smile, but it slumped pretty fast, and he looked more scared then ever. There's only so much you can do.

'Right, boys,' said Threetrees, once the gear was all checked and stowed in its proper places, 'here's how we'll get it done.'

Grim, Dogman, opposite sides of their camp, out in the trees. Wait for the signal, then shoot any Flathead with a bow. Failing that, whatever's closest.'

'Right you are, chief,' said the Dogman. Grim gave a nod.

'Tul, you and me'll take the front, but wait for the signal, eh?'

'Aye,' rumbled the giant.

'Dow, you and Forley at the back. You come on when you see us go. But this

time you wait for us to go!’ hissed Threetrees, stabbing with his thick finger.

‘Course, chief.’ Dow shrugged his shoulders, just as though he always did as he was told.

‘Right then, there it is,’ said Threetrees, ‘anyone still confused? Any empty heads round the fire?’ The Dogman mumbled and shook his head. They all did. ‘Fair enough. Just one more thing.’ The old boy leaned forward, looking at each of them one by one. ‘Wait . . . for . . . the . . . fucking . . . signal!’

It wasn’t ’til the Dogman was hid behind a bush with his bow in his hand and a shaft at the ready that he realised. He’d no idea what the signal was. He looked down at the Shanka, still sat there all unwary, grunting and shouting and banging about. By the dead he needed to piss. Always needed to piss before a fight. Had anyone said the signal? He couldn’t remember.

‘Shit,’ he whispered, and just then Dow came hurtling out from the trees, axe in one hand, sword in the other.

‘Fucking Flatheads!’ he screamed, giving the nearest a fearsome big blow in the head and splattering blood across the clearing. In so far as you could tell what a Shanka was thinking, these ones looked greatly surprised. Dogman reckoned that would have to do for a signal.

He let loose his shaft at the nearest Flathead, just reaching for a big club and watched it catch it through the armpit with a satisfying thunk. ‘Hah!’ he shouted. He saw Dow spit another through the back with his sword, but there was a big Shanka now with a spear ready to throw. An arrow came looping out of the trees and stuck it through the neck, and it let go a squeal and sprawled out backwards. That Grim was a damn good shot.

Now Threetrees came roaring from the scrub on the other side of the clearing, catching them off guard. He barged one Flathead in the back with his shield and it sprawled face-first into the fire, he hacked at another with his sword. The Dogman let go a shaft and it stuck a Shanka in its gut. It dropped down on its knees and a moment later Tul took its head off with a great swing of his sword.

The fight was joined and moving quick – chop, grunt, scrape, rattle. There was blood flying and weapons swinging and bodies dropping too fast for the Dogman to try an arrow at. The three of them had the last few hemmed in, squawking and gibbering. Tul Duru was swinging his big sword around, keeping them at bay. Threetrees darted in and chopped the legs out from under one, and Dow cut another down as it looked round.

The last one squawked and made a run for the trees. Dogman shot at it, but he was hurrying and he missed. The arrow almost hit Dow in the leg, but luckily he didn’t notice. It had almost got away into the bushes, then it squealed and fell back, thrashing. Forley had stabbed it, hiding in the scrub. ‘I got one!’ he yelled.

It was quiet for a moment, while the Dogman scrambled down toward the clearing and they all looked round to see if there was anything left to fight, then Black Dow gave a great bellow, shaking his bloody weapons over his head. ‘We fucking killed ’em!’

‘You nearly killed us all, you damn fool!’ shouted Threetrees.

‘Eh?’

‘What about the fucking signal?’

'I thought I heard you shout!'

'I never!'

'Did you not?' asked Dow, looking greatly puzzled. 'What was the signal anyhow?'

Threetrees gave a sigh and put his head in his hands.

Forley was still staring down at his sword. 'I got one!' he said again. Now that the fight was over, the Dogman was about ready to burst, so he turned round and pissed against a tree.

'We killed 'em!' shouted Tul, clapping him on the back.

'Watch out!' yelled Dogman as piss went all down his leg. They all had a laugh at him over that. Even Grim had himself a little chuckle.

Tul shook Threetrees by the shoulder. 'We killed 'em, chief!'

'We killed these, aye,' he said, looking sour, 'but there'll be plenty more. Thousands of 'em. They won't be happy staying up here neither, up here beyond the mountains. Sooner or later they'll be going south. Maybe in the summer, when the passes clear, maybe later. But it's not long off.'

The Dogman glanced at the others, all shifty and worried after that little speech. The glow of victory hadn't lasted too long. It never did. He looked round at the dead Flatheads on the ground, broken and bloody, sprawled and crumpled. It seemed a hollow little victory they'd had now. 'Shouldn't we try and tell 'em, Threetrees?' he asked. 'Shouldn't we try and warn someone?'

'Aye.' Threetrees gave a sad little smile. 'But who?'

The Course of True Love

Jezal trudged miserably across the grey Agriont with his fencing steels in his hand: yawning, stumbling, grumbling, still horribly sore from his endless run the day before. He hardly saw anyone as he dragged himself to his daily bullying from Lord Marshal Varuz. Apart from the odd premature tweeting of some bird in amongst the gables and the tired scraping of his own reluctant boots, all was quiet. No one was up at this time. No one should be up at this time. Him least of all.

He hauled his aching legs through the archway and up the tunnel. The sun was barely above the horizon and the courtyard beyond was full of deep shadows. Squinting into the darkness he could see Varuz sat at the table, waiting for him. Damn it. He had hoped to be early for once. Did the old bastard sleep at all?

‘Lord Marshal!’ shouted Jezal, breaking into a half-hearted jog.

‘No. Not today.’ A shiver crept up Jezal’s neck. It was not the voice of his fencing master, but there was something unpleasantly familiar about it. ‘Marshal Varuz is busy with more important matters this morning.’ Inquisitor Gloкта was sitting in the shadows by the table and smiling up with his revolting gap-toothed grin. Jezal’s skin prickled with disgust. It was hardly what one needed first thing in the morning.

He slowed to a reluctant walk and stopped next to the table. ‘You will doubtless be pleased to learn that there will be no running, or swimming, or beam, or heavy bar today,’ said the cripple. ‘You won’t even be needing those.’ He waved his cane at Jezal’s fencing steels. ‘We will just be having a little chat. That is all.’

The idea of five punishing hours with Varuz seemed suddenly very appealing, but Jezal was not about to show his discomfort. He tossed his steels onto the table with a loud rattle and sat down carelessly in the other chair, Gloкта regarding him from the shadows all the while. Jezal had it in mind to stare him into some kind of submission, but it proved a vain attempt. After a couple of seconds looking at that wasted face, that empty grin, those fever-bright sunken eyes, he began to find the table top most interesting.

‘So tell me, Captain, why did you take up fencing?’

A game then. A private hand of cards with only two players. And everything that was said would get back to Varuz, that was sure. Jezal would have to play his hand carefully, keep his cards close and his wits about him. ‘For my own honour, for that of my family, for that of my King,’ he said coldly. The cripple could try and find fault with that answer.

‘Ah, so it’s for the benefit of your nation that you put yourself through this. What a fine citizen you must be. What selflessness. What an example to us all.’ Gloкта snorted. ‘Please! If you must lie, at least pick a lie that you yourself find convincing. That answer is an insult to us both.’

How dare this toothless has-been take that tone with him? Jezal's legs gave a twitch: he was right on the point of getting up and walking away, Varuz and his hideous stooge be damned. But he caught the cripple's eye as he put his hands on the arms of the chair to push himself up. Glokta was smiling at him, a mocking sort of smile. To leave would be to admit defeat somehow. Why did he take up fencing anyway? 'My father wanted me to do it.'

'So, so. My heart brims with sympathy. The loyal son, bound by his strong sense of duty, is forced to fulfil his father's ambitions. A familiar tale, like a comfortable old chair we all love to sit in. Tell 'em what they want to hear, eh? A better answer, but just as far from the truth.'

'Why don't you tell me then?' snapped Jezal sulkily, 'since you seem to know so much about it!'

'Alright, I will. Men don't fence for their King, or for their families, or for the exercise either, before you try that one on me. They fence for the recognition, for the glory. They fence for their own advancement. They fence for themselves. I should know.'

'You should know?' Jezal snorted. 'It hardly seems to have worked in your case.' He regretted it immediately. Damn his mouth, it got him in all kinds of trouble.

But Glokta only flashed his disgusting smile again. 'It was working well enough, until I found my way into the Emperor's prisons. What's your excuse, liar?'

Jezal didn't like the way this conversation was going. He was too used to easy victories at the card table, and poor players. His skills had dulled. Better to sit this one out until he got the measure of his new opponent. He clamped his jaw shut and said nothing.

'It takes hard work, of course, winning a Contest. You should have seen our mutual friend Collem West working. He sweated at it for months, running around while the rest of us laughed at him. A jumped-up, idiot commoner competing with his betters, that's what we all thought. Blundering through his forms, stumbling about on the beam, being made a fool of, again and again, day after day. But look at him now.' Glokta tapped his cane with a finger. 'And look at me. Seems he had the last laugh, eh, Captain? Just shows what you can achieve with a little hard work. You've twice the talent he had, and the right blood. You don't have to work one tenth so hard, but you refuse to work at all.'

Jezal wasn't about to let that one past. 'Not work at all? Don't I put myself through this torture every day—'

'Torture?' asked Glokta sharply.

Jezal realised too late his unfortunate choice of words. 'Well,' he mumbled, 'I meant ...'

'I know more than a little about both fencing and torture.'

Believe me when I say,' and the Inquisitor's grotesque grin grew wider still, 'that they're two quite different things.'

'Er . . .' said Jezal, still off balance.

'You have the ambitions, and the means to realise them. A little effort would do it. A few months' hard work, then you would probably never need to try at anything again in your life, if that's what you want. A few short months, and

you're set.' Glokta licked at his empty gums. 'Barring accidents of course. It's a great chance you've been offered. I'd take it, if I was you, but I don't know. Maybe you're a fool as well as a liar.'

'I'm no fool,' said Jezal coldly. It was the best he could do.

Glokta raised an eyebrow, then winced, leaning heavily on his cane as he slowly pushed himself to his feet. 'Give it up if you like, by all means. Sit around for the rest of your days and drink and talk shit with the rest of the junior officers. There are a lot of people who'd be more than happy to live that life. A lot of people who haven't had the chances you've had. Give it up. Lord Marshal Varuz will be disappointed, and Major West, and your father, and so on, but please believe me when I say,' and he leaned down, still smiling his horrible smile, 'that I couldn't care less. Good day, Captain Luthar.' And Glokta limped off toward the archway.

After that less than delightful interview, Jezal found himself with a few hours of unexpected free time on his hands – but he was scarcely in the frame of mind to enjoy it. He wandered the empty streets, squares and gardens of the Agriont, thinking grimly on what the cripple had said to him, cursing the name of Glokta, but unable to quite push the conversation from his mind. He turned it over and over, every phrase, constantly coming up with new things that he should have said. If only he had thought of them at the time.

'Ah, Captain Luthar!' Jezal started and looked up. A man he did not recognise was sitting on the dewy grass beneath a tree, smiling up at him, a half-eaten apple in his hand. 'The early morning is the perfect time for a stroll, I find. Calm and grey and clean and empty. It's nothing like the gaudy pinkness of evening time. All that clutter, all those people coming and going. How can one think in amongst all that nonsense? And now I see you are of the same mind. How delightful.' He took a big, crunching bite out of the apple.

'Do I know you?'

'Oh no, no,' said the stranger, getting to his feet and brushing some dirt from the seat of his trousers, 'not yet. My name is Sulfur, Yoru Sulfur.'

'Really? And what brings you to the Agriont?'

'You might say I have come on a diplomatic mission.'

Jezal looked him over, trying to place his origin. 'A mission from?'

'From my master, of course,' said Sulfur unhelpfully. His eyes were different colours, Jezal noticed. An ugly and off-putting characteristic, he rather thought.

'And your master is?'

'A very wise and powerful man.' He stripped the core with his teeth and tossed it away into the bushes, wiping his hands on the front of his shirt. 'I see you've been fencing.'

Jezal glanced down at his steels. 'Yes,' he said, realising that he had finally come to a decision, 'but for the last time. I'm giving it up.'

'Oh dear me, no!' The strange man seized Jezal by the shoulder. 'Oh dear me, no you mustn't!'

'What?'

'No, no! My master would be horrified if he knew. Horrified! Give up fencing and you give up more than that! This is how one comes to the notice of the public, you see? They decide, in the end. There's no nobility without the

commoners, no nobility at all! They decide!’

‘What?’ Jezal glanced around the park, hoping to catch sight of a guard so he could notify him that a dangerous madman was loose in the Agriont.

‘No, you mustn’t give it up! I won’t hear of it! No indeed! I’m sure that you’ll stick with it after all! You must!’

Jezal shook Sulfur’s hand off his shoulder. ‘Who are you?’

‘Sulfur, Yoru Sulfur, at your service. See you again, Captain, at the Contest, if not before!’ And he waved over his shoulder as he strolled off.

Jezal stared after him, mouth slightly open. ‘Damn it!’ he shouted, throwing his steels down on the grass. Everyone seemed to want to take a hand in his business today, even crazy strangers in the park.

As soon as he thought it was late enough, Jezal went to call on Major West. You could always be sure of a sympathetic ear with him, and Jezal was hoping that he might be able to manipulate his friend into breaking the bad news to Lord Marshal Varuz. That was a scene that he wanted no part of, if he could possibly avoid it. He knocked on the door and waited, he knocked again. The door opened.

‘Captain Luthar! What an almost unbearable honour!’

‘Ardee,’ muttered Jezal, somewhat surprised to find her here, ‘it’s good to see you again.’ For once he actually meant it. She was interesting, is what she was. It was a new and refreshing thing for him to actually be interested in what a woman had to say. And she was damn good-looking too, there was no denying it, and seemed prettier every time he saw her. Nothing could ever happen between them, of course, what with West being his friend and all, but there was no harm in looking, was there? ‘Er . . . is your brother around?’

She threw herself carelessly down onto the settle against the wall, one leg stretched out, looking very sour. ‘He’s out. Gone out. Always busy. Much too busy for me.’ There was a definite flush to her cheek. Jezal’s eye lighted on the decanter. The stopper was out and the wine was halfway down.

‘Are you drunk?’

‘Somewhat,’ she squinted at a half-full wine glass at her elbow, ‘but mostly I’m just bored.’

‘It’s not even ten.’

‘Can’t I be bored before ten?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Leave the moralising to my brother. It suits him better. And have a drink.’ She waved her hand at the bottle. ‘You look like you need one.’

Well, that was true enough. He poured himself a glass and sat down in a chair facing Ardee, while she regarded him with heavy-lidded eyes. She took her own glass from the table. There was a thick book lying next to it, face down.

‘How’s the book?’ asked Jezal.

‘*The Fall of the Master Maker*, in three volumes. They say it’s one of the great classics of history. Lot of boring rubbish,’ she snorted derisively. ‘Full of wise Magi, stern knights with mighty swords and ladies with mightier bosoms. Magic, violence and romance, in equal measure. Utter shit.’ She slapped the book off the table and it tumbled onto the carpet, pages flapping.

‘There must be something you can find to keep busy?’

'Really? What would you suggest?'

'My cousins do a lot of embroidery.'

'Fuck yourself.'

'Hmm,' said Jezal, smiling. The swearing no longer seemed half so offensive as it had done when they first met. 'What did you do at home, in England?'

'Oh, home,' her head dropped against the back of the settle. 'I thought I was bored there. I could hardly wait to come here to the bright centre of things. Now I can hardly wait to go back. Marry some farmer. Have a dozen brats. At least I'd get some conversation that way.' She closed her eyes and sighed. 'But Collem won't let me. He feels responsible, now that our father's dead. Thinks it's too dangerous. He'd rather I didn't get slaughtered by the Northmen, but that's about where his sense of responsibility ends. It certainly doesn't extend to spending ten minutes together with me. So it looks like I'm stuck here, with all you arrogant snobs.'

Jezal shifted uncomfortably in his seat. 'He seems to manage.'

'Oh yes,' snorted Ardee, 'Collem West, he's a damn fine fellow! Won a Contest don't you know? First through the breach at Ulrioch, wasn't he? No breeding at all, never be one of us, but a damn fine fellow, for a commoner! Shame about that upstart sister of his though, too clever by half. And they say she drinks,' she whispered. 'Doesn't know her place. Total disgrace. Best just to ignore her.' She sighed again. 'Yes, the sooner I go home, the happier everyone will be.'

'I won't be happier.' Damn, did he say that out loud?

Ardee laughed, none too pleasantly. 'Well, it's enormously noble of you to say so. Why aren't you fencing anyway?'

'Marshal Varuz was busy today.' He paused for a moment. 'In fact, I had your friend Sand dan Glokta as fencing master this morning.'

'Really? What did he have to say for himself?'

'Various things. He called me a fool.'

'Imagine that.'

Jezal frowned. 'Yes, well. I'm as bored with fencing as you are with that book. That was what I wanted to talk to your brother about. I'm thinking of giving it up.'

She burst out laughing. Snorting, gurgling peals of it. Her whole body was shaking. Wine sloshed out of her glass and splattered across the floor. 'What's so funny?' he demanded.

'It's just,' she wiped a tear from her eye, 'I had a bet with Collem. He was sure you'd stick at it. And now I'm ten marks richer.'

'I'm not sure that I like being the subject of your bet,' said Jezal sharply.

'I'm not sure I give a damn.'

'This is serious.'

'No it isn't!' she snapped. 'For my brother it was serious, he had to do it! No one even notices you if you don't have a "dan" in your name, and who'd know better than me? You're the only person who's given me the time of day since I got here, and then only because Collem made you. I've precious little money and no blood at all, and that makes me less than nothing to the likes of you. The men ignore me and the women cut me dead. I've got nothing here, nothing and no one, and you think you've got the hard life? Please! I might

take up fencing,' she said bitterly. 'Ask the Lord Marshal if he has space for a pupil, would you? At least then I'd have someone to talk to!'

Jezal blinked. That wasn't interesting. That was rude. 'Hold on, you've no idea what it's like to—'

'Oh stop whining! How old are you? Five? Why don't you go back to sucking on your mother's tit, infant?'

He could hardly believe what he was hearing. How dare she? 'My mother's dead,' he said. Hah. That should make her feel guilty, squeeze an apology out of her. It didn't.

'Dead? Lucky her, at least she doesn't have to listen to your damn whining! You spoiled little rich boys are all the same. You get everything you could possibly want, then throw a tantrum because you have to pick it up yourself! You're pathetic! You make me fucking sick!'

Jezal goggled. His face was burning, stinging, as if he'd been slapped. He'd rather have been slapped. He had never been spoken to like that in his life. Never! It was worse than Glokta. Much worse, and far more unexpected. He realised his mouth was hanging half open. He snapped it shut, grinding his teeth together, slapped his glass down on the table, and got up to leave. He was turning to the door when it suddenly opened, leaving him and Major West staring at each other.

'Jezal,' said West, looking at first simply surprised and then, as he glanced over at his sister, sprawling on the settle, slightly suspicious. 'What are you doing here?'

'Er . . . I came to see you actually.'

'Oh yes?'

'Yes. But it can wait. I've things to do.' And Jezal pushed past his friend and out into the corridor.

'What was all that about?' He heard West saying as he strode away from the room. 'Are you drunk?'

With every step Jezal's fury mounted until he was halfway to being strangled by it. He had been the victim of an assault! A savage and undeserved attack! He stopped in the corridor, trembling with rage, his breath snorting in his nose like he'd run ten miles, his fists clenched painfully tight. And from a woman too! A woman! And a bloody commoner! How dare she? He had wasted time on her, and laughed at her jokes, and found her attractive! She should have been honoured to be noticed!

'That fucking bitch!' he snarled to himself. He had half a mind to go back and say it to her face, but it was too late. He stared around for something to hit. How to pay her back? How? Then it came to him.

Prove her wrong.

That would do it. Prove her wrong, and that crippled bastard Glokta too. He'd show them how hard he could work. He'd show them he was no fool, no liar, no spoiled child. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. He'd win this damn Contest, is what he'd do! That'd wipe the smiles off their faces! He set off briskly down the corridor, with a strange new feeling building in his chest.

A sense of purpose. That was what it was. Perhaps it wasn't too late for a run.

How Dogs are Trained

Practical Frost stood by the wall, utterly motionless, utterly silent, barely visible in the deep shadows, a part of the building. The albino hadn't moved an inch in an hour or more, hadn't shifted his feet, hadn't blinked, hadn't breathed that Glokta had noticed, his eyes fixed on the street before them.

Glokta himself cursed, shifted uncomfortably, winced, scratched his face, sucked at his empty gums. *What's keeping them? A few minutes more and I might fall asleep, drop into that stinking canal and drown. How very apt that would be.* He watched the oily, smelly water below him flap and ripple. *Body found floating by the docks, bloated by seawater and far, far beyond recognition . . .*

Frost touched his arm in the darkness, pointed down the street with a big white finger. Three men were moving slowly toward them, walking with the slightly bow-legged stance of men who spend a lot of time aboard ship, keeping their balance on a swaying deck. *So that's one half of our little party. Better late than never.* The three sailors came halfway across the bridge over the canal then stopped and waited, no more than twenty strides away. Glokta could hear the tone of their conversation: brash, confident, common accents. He shuffled slightly further into the shadows clinging to the building.

Now footsteps came from the opposite direction, hurried footsteps. Two more men appeared, walking quickly down the street. One, a very tall, thin fellow in an expensive-looking fur coat was glancing suspiciously around him. *That must be Gofred Hornlach, senior Mercer. Our man.* His companion had a sword at his hip, and was struggling with a big wooden trunk over one shoulder. *Servant, or bodyguard, or both. He is of no interest.* Glokta felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickling as they neared the bridge. Hornlach exchanged a few quick words with one of the sailors, a man with a big brown beard.

'Ready?' he whispered to Frost. The Practical nodded.

'Hold!' shouted Glokta at the top of his voice, 'in the name of his Majesty!' Hornlach's servant spun round, dropping the trunk onto the bridge with a bang, hand moving toward his sword. There was a soft twang from the shadows on the other side of the road. The servant looked surprised, gave a snort, then toppled onto his face. Practical Frost strode swiftly out of the shadows, feet padding on the road.

Hornlach stared down, wide-eyed, at the corpse of his bodyguard, then across at the hulking albino. He turned to the sailors. 'Help me!' he cried. 'Stop him!'

Their leader smiled back. 'I don't think so.' His two companions moved without hurry to block the bridge. The Mercer stumbled away, took a faltering step toward the shadows by the canal on the other side. Severard appeared from a doorway before him, flatbow rested across his shoulder. *Replace the bow with a bunch of flowers and he'd look as if he was on his way to a wedding.*

You'd never think that he just killed a man.

Surrounded, Hornlach could only look around dumbly, eyes wide with fear and surprise, as the two Practicals approached, Glokta limping up behind them. 'But I paid you!' Hornlach shouted desperately at the sailors.

'You paid me for a berth,' said their Captain. 'Loyalty is extra.'

Practical Frost's big white hand slapped down on the merchant's shoulder, forced him onto his knees. Severard strolled over to the bodyguard, wedged the dirty toe of his boot under the body and rolled it over. The corpse stared up at the night sky, eyes glassy, the feathers of the flatbow bolt sticking out from his neck. The blood round his mouth looked black in the moonlight.

'Dead,' grunted Severard, most unnecessarily.

'A bolt through the neck will do that,' said Glokta. 'Clean him up, would you?'

'Right you are.' Severard grabbed the bodyguard's feet and hauled them over the parapet of the bridge, then he took him under the armpits and heaved the body straight over the side with a grunt. *So smooth, so clean, so practised. You can tell he's done it before.* There was a splash as the corpse hit the slimy water below. Frost had Hornlach's hands tied firmly behind him now, and the bag on. The prisoner squawked through the canvas as he was dragged to his feet. Glokta himself shuffled over to the three sailors, his legs numb after all that time spent standing still in the alley.

'And here we are,' he said, pulling a heavy purse from his inside coat pocket. He held it swinging just above the Captain's waiting palm. 'Tell me, what happened tonight?'

The old sailor smiled, weathered face crinkling up like boot leather. 'My cargo was spoiling and we had to be away on the first tide, I told him that. We waited and waited, half the night down by that stinking canal, but would you believe it? The bastard never showed.'

'Very good. That's the story I'd tell in Westport, if anyone should ask.'

The Captain looked hurt. 'That's how it happened, Inquisitor. What other story could there be?'

Glokta let the purse drop and the money jingled inside. 'With the compliments of his Majesty.'

The Captain weighed the purse in his hand. 'Always pleased to do his Majesty a favour!' And he and his two companions turned, all yellow smiles, and made off toward the quay.

'Right then,' said Glokta, 'let's get on with it.'

'Where are my clothes?' shouted Hornlach, wriggling in his chair.

'I do apologise for that. I know it's quite uncomfortable, but clothes can hide things. Leave a man his clothes and you leave him pride, and dignity, and all kinds of things it's better not to have in here. I never question a prisoner with their clothes on. Do you remember Salem Rews?'

'Who?'

'Salem Rews. One of your people. A Mercer. We caught him dodging the King's taxes. He made a confession, named a few people. I wanted to talk to them, but they all died.'

The merchant's eyes flickered left and right. *Thinking about his options, trying to guess what we might know.* 'People die all the time.'

Glokta stared at the painted corpse of Juvens behind his prisoner, bleeding bright red paint all over the wall. *People die all the time.* 'Of course, but not quite so violently. I have a notion that someone wanted them dead, that someone ordered them dead. I have a notion it was you.'

'You've got no proof! No proof! You won't get away with this!'

'Proof means nothing, Hornlach, but I'll indulge you. Rews survived. He's just down the hall, as it goes, no friends left, blubbing away, naming every Mercer he can think of, or that we can think of, for that matter.' Narrowed eyes, but no reply. 'We used him to catch Carpi.'

'Carpi?' asked the merchant, trying to look nonchalant.

'Surely you remember your assassin? Slightly flabby Styrian? Acne scars? Swears a lot? We have him too. He told us the whole story. How you hired him, how much you paid him, what you asked him to do. The whole story.' Glokta smiled. 'He has an excellent memory, for a killer, very detailed.'

The fear was showing now, just a trace of it, but Hornlach rallied well. 'This is an affront to my Guild!' he shouted, with as much authority as he could muster, naked and tied to a chair. 'My master, Coster dan Kault, will never allow this, and he's a close friend of Superior Kalyne!'

'Shit on Kalyne, he's finished. Besides, Kault thinks you're tucked up safe aboard that ship, bound for Westport and far beyond our reach. I don't think you'll be missed for several weeks.' The merchant's face had gone slack. 'A great deal could happen in that time . . . a very great deal.'

Hornlach's tongue darted over his lips. He glanced furtively up at Frost and Severard, leaned slightly forward. *So. Now comes the bargaining.* 'Inquisitor,' he said in a wheedling tone, 'if I've learned one thing from life, it's that every man wants something. Every man has his price, yes? And we have deep pockets. You have only to name it. Only name it! What do you want?'

'What do I want?' asked Glokta, leaning in to a more conspiratorial distance.

'Yes. What's this all about? What do you want?' Hornlach was smiling now, a coy, clever little smile. *How quaint, but you won't buy your way out of this.*

'I want my teeth back.'

The merchant's smile began to fade.

'I want my leg back.'

Hornlach swallowed.

'I want my life back.'

The prisoner had turned very pale.

'No? Then perhaps I'll settle for your head on a stick. You've nothing else I want, no matter how deep your pockets are.' Hornlach was trembling slightly now. *No more bluster? No more deals? Then we can begin.* Glokta picked up the paper in front of him, and read the first question. 'What is your name?'

'Look, Inquisitor, I . . .' Frost smashed the table with his fist and Hornlach cowered in his chair.

'Answer his fucking question!' screamed Severard in his face.

'Gofred Hornlach,' squealed the merchant.

Glokta nodded. 'Good. You are a senior member of the Guild of Mercers?'

'Yes, yes!'

'One of Magister Kault's deputies, in fact?'

'You know I am!'

'Have you conspired with other Mercers to defraud his Majesty the King? Did you hire an assassin to wilfully murder ten of his Majesty's subjects? Were you ordered so to do by Magister Coster dan Kault, the head of the Guild of Mercers?'

'No!' shouted Hornlach, voice squeaky with panic. *That is not the answer we need.* Glokta glanced up at Practical Frost. The big white fist sank into the merchant's gut, and he gave a gentle sigh and slid sideways.

'My mother keeps dogs, you know,' said Glokta.

'Dogs,' hissed Severard in the gasping merchant's ear, as he shoved him back into the chair.

'She loves them. Trains them to do all manner of tricks.' Glokta pursed his lips. 'Do you know how dogs are trained?'

Hornlach was still winded, lolling in his chair with watering eyes, some way from being able to speak. *Still at that stage of a fish pulled suddenly from the water. Mouth opening and closing, but no sound.*

'Repetition,' said Glokta. 'Repeat, repeat, repeat. You must have that dog perform his tricks one hundred times the same, and then you must do it all again. It's all about repetition. And if you want that dog to bark on cue, you mustn't be shy with the whip. You're going to bark for me, Hornlach, in front of the Open Council.'

'You're mad,' cried the Mercer, staring around at them, 'you're all mad!'

Glokta flashed his empty smile. 'If you like. If it helps.' He glanced back at the paper in his hand. 'What is your name?'

The prisoner swallowed. 'Gofred Hornlach.'

'You are a senior member of the Guild of Mercers?'

'Yes.'

'One of Magister Kault's deputies, in fact?'

'Yes!'

'Have you conspired with other Mercers to defraud his Majesty the King? Did you hire an assassin to wilfully murder ten of his Majesty's subjects? Were you ordered so to do by Magister Coster dan Kault, the head of the Guild of Mercers?'

Hornlach cast desperately around him. Frost stared back, Severard stared back.

'Well?' demanded Glokta.

The merchant closed his eyes. 'Yes,' he whimpered.

'What's that?'

'Yes!'

Glokta smiled. 'Excellent. Now tell me. What is your name?'

Tea and Vengeance

‘It’s a beautiful country, isn’t it?’ asked Bayaz, staring up at the rugged fells on either side of the road. Their horses’ hooves thumped slowly along the track, the steady sound at odds with Logen’s unease. ‘Is it?’

‘Well, it’s a hard country, of course, to those who don’t know its ways. A tough country, and unforgiving. But there’s something noble there too.’ The First of the Magi swept his arm across the view, breathed in the cold air with relish. ‘It has honesty, integrity. The best steel doesn’t always shine the brightest.’ He glanced over, swaying gently in his saddle. ‘You should know that.’

‘I can’t say I see the beauty of it.’

‘No? What do you see?’

Logen let his eyes wander over the steep, grassy slopes, spotted with patches of sedge and brown gorse, studded with outcrops of grey rock and stands of trees. ‘I see good ground for a battle. Provided you got here first.’

‘Really? How so?’

Logen pointed at a knobbly hilltop. ‘Archers on the bluff there couldn’t be seen from the road, and you could hide most of your foot in these rocks. A few of the lightest armoured left on the slopes, just to draw the enemy on up the steepest ground there.’

He pointed to the thorny bushes that covered the lower slopes. ‘You’d let them come on a way, then when they were struggling through that gorse, you’d give them the arrows. Shafts falling on you from above like that, that’s no fun at all. They come quicker and further, and they bite deeper. That’d break them up. By the time they got to the rocks they’d be dog-tired and running short on discipline. That would be the time to charge. A bunch of Carls, leaping out of those stones, charging down from above, fresh and keen and screaming like devils, that could break ’em right there.’

Logen narrowed his eyes at the hillside. He’d been on both sides of a surprise like that, and in neither case was the memory a pleasant one. ‘But if they had a mind to hold, a few horsemen in those trees could finish it up. A few Named Men, a few hard fighters, bearing down on you from a place you never expected them, that’s a terrifying thing. That’d make them run. But tired as they’d be, they wouldn’t run too fast. That means prisoners, and prisoners might mean ransoms, or at least enemies cheaply killed. I see a slaughter, or a victory worth the singing, depending which side you’re on. That’s what I see.’

Bayaz smiled, head nodding with the slow movement of his horse. ‘Was it Stolicus who said the ground must be a general’s best friend, or it becomes his worst enemy?’

‘I never heard of him, but he was right enough. This is good ground for an army, providing you got here first. Getting there first is the trick.’

‘Indeed. We don’t have an army, however.’

'These trees could hide a few horsemen even better than a lot.' Logen glanced sidelong at the wizard. He was slouched happily in the saddle, enjoying a pleasant ride in the country. 'I don't think Bethod will have appreciated your advice, and I had scores enough with him already. He got wounded where he feels it most, in his pride. He'll want vengeance. Want it badly.'

'Ah yes, vengeance, that most widespread of Northern pastimes. Its popularity never seems to wane.'

Logen stared grimly around at the trees, the rocks, the folds in the valley's sides, the many hiding places. 'There'll be men out in these hills, looking for us. Small bands of skilled and battle-hardened men, well mounted and well armed, familiar with the land. Now Bethod has finished all his enemies there's nowhere in the North out of his reach. They might be waiting there,' he pointed off towards some rocks by the road, 'or in those trees, or those.' Malacus Quai, riding up ahead with the packhorse, glanced nervously around. 'They could be anywhere.'

'Does that frighten you?' asked Bayaz.

'Everything frightens me, and it's well that it does. Fear is a good friend to the hunted, it's kept me alive this long. The dead are fearless, and I don't care to join them. He'll send men to the library too.'

'Oh yes, to burn my books and so on.'

'Does that frighten you?'

'Not much. The stones by the gate have the word of Juvens on them, and that is not to be denied, even now. No one with violence in mind can come near. I imagine Bethod's men will wander around the lake in the rain until they run out of food, all the while thinking how very strange it is that they cannot find so large a thing as a library. No,' said the wizard happily, scratching at his beard. 'I would concentrate on our own predicament. What happens, do you think, if we're caught?'

'Bethod will kill us, and in the most unpleasant manner he can think of. Unless he has it in mind to be merciful, and let us off with a warning.'

'That doesn't seem likely.'

'I've been thinking the same thing. Our best chance is to make for the Whiteflow, try to get across the river into Angland, and trust to luck we aren't seen.' Logen didn't like trusting to luck, the very word left a sour taste. He peered up at the cloudy sky. 'We could do with some bad weather. A healthy downpour could hide us nicely.' The skies had been pissing on him for weeks, but now that he needed rain they refused to produce a drop.

Malacus Quai was looking over his shoulder at them, his eyes big and round with worry. 'Shouldn't we try to move faster?'

'Perhaps,' said Logen, patting the neck of his horse, 'but that would tire the horses, and we may need all the speed we can get later. We could hide in the day and travel by night, but then we risk getting lost. We're better as we are. Move slowly and hope we aren't seen.' He frowned at the hilltop. 'Hope we haven't been seen already.'

'Hmm,' said Bayaz, 'then this might be the best time to tell you. That witch Caurib isn't half the fool I pretended she was.'

Logen felt a sinking sensation. 'No?'

'No, for all her paint and gold and chat about the utmost north, she knows what she is about. The long eye, they call it. An old trick, but effective. She has been watching us.'

'She knows where we are?'

'She knows when we left, more than likely, and in what direction we were heading.'

'That does nothing for our chances.'

'I should say not.'

'Shit.' Logen caught some movement in the trees to their left, and he snatched hold of the hilt of his sword. A couple of birds took to the skies. He waited, heart in his mouth. Nothing. He let his hand drop back. 'We should have killed them while we had the chance. All three of them.'

'But we didn't, and there it is.' Bayaz looked over at Logen. 'If they do catch us, what's your plan?'

'Run. And hope our horses are the faster.'

'And this one?' asked Bayaz.

The wind blew keenly through the hollow in spite of the trees, making the flames of the campfire flicker and dance. Malacus Quai hunched his shoulders and drew his blanket tight around them. He peered at the short stem that Bayaz was holding up to him, forehead crinkled with concentration.

'Erm . . .' This was the fifth plant, and the miserable apprentice had yet to get one of them right. 'Is that . . . er . . . Ilyith?'

'Ilyith?' echoed the wizard, his face giving no clue as to whether it was the right answer. He was merciless as Bethod where his apprentice was concerned.

'Perhaps?'

'Hardly.' The apprentice closed his eyes and sighed for the fifth time that evening. Logen felt for him, he really did, but there was nothing to be done. 'Ursilum, in the old tongue, the round-leafed kind.'

'Yes, yes, of course, Ursilum, it was at the end of my tongue the whole time.'

'If the name was at the end of your tongue, then the uses of the plant cannot be far behind, eh?'

The apprentice narrowed his eyes and looked hopefully up towards the night sky, as though the answer might be written in the stars. 'Is it . . . for aches in the joints?'

'No, it is decidedly not. I am afraid your aching joints will still be troubling you.' Bayaz turned the stem slowly round in his fingers. 'Ursilum has no uses, not that I know of. It's just a plant.' And he tossed it away into the bushes.

'Just a plant,' echoed Quai, shaking his head. Logen sighed and rubbed his tired eyes.

'I'm sorry, Master Ninefingers, are we boring you?'

'What does it matter?' asked Logen, throwing his hands up in the air. 'Who cares about the name of a plant with no use?'

Bayaz smiled. 'A fair point. Tell us, Malacus, what does it matter?'

'If a man seeks to change the world, he should first understand it.' The apprentice trotted the words out as if by rote, evidently relieved to be asked a question he knew the answer to. 'The smith must learn the ways of metals, the carpenter the ways of wood, or their work will be of but little worth. Base magic is wild and dangerous, for it comes from the Other Side, and to draw

from the world below is fraught with peril. The Magus tempers magic with knowledge, and thus produces High Art, but like the smith or the carpenter, he should only seek to change that which he understands. With each thing he learns, his power is increased. So must the Magus strive to learn all, to understand the world entire. The tree is only as strong as its root, and knowledge is the root of power.'

'Don't tell me, Juven's *Principles of Art*?'

'The very first lines,' said Bayaz.

'Forgive me for saying so, but I've been on this world for more than thirty years, and I've yet to understand a single thing that's happened. To know the world completely? To understand everything? That's quite a task.'

The Magus chuckled. 'An impossible one, to be sure. To truly know and understand even a blade of grass is the study of a lifetime, and the world is ever changing. That is why we tend to specialise.'

'So what did you choose?'

'Fire,' said Bayaz, gazing happily into the flames, the light dancing on his bald head. 'Fire, and force, and will. But even in my chosen fields, after countless long years of study, I remain a novice. The more you learn, the more you realise how little you know. Still, the struggle itself is worthwhile. Knowledge is the root of power, after all.'

'So with enough knowledge, you Magi can do anything?'

Bayaz frowned. 'There are limits. And there are rules.'

'Like the First Law?' Master and apprentice glanced up at Logen as one. 'It's forbidden to speak with devils, am I right?' It was plain that Quai didn't remember his fevered outburst, his mouth was open with surprise. Bayaz' eyes only narrowed a little, with the faintest trace of suspicion.

'Why, yes you are,' said the First of the Magi. 'It is forbidden to touch the Other Side direct. The First Law must apply to all, without exception. As must the Second.'

'Which is?'

'It is forbidden to eat the flesh of men.'

Logen raised an eyebrow. 'You wizards get up to some strange stuff.'

Bayaz smiled. 'Oh, you don't know the half of it.' He turned to his apprentice, holding up a lumpy brown root. 'And now, Master Quai, would you be good enough to tell me the name of this?'

Logen couldn't help grinning to himself. He knew this one.

'Come, come, Master Quai, we don't have all night.'

Logen wasn't able to stand the apprentice's misery any longer. He leaned toward him, pretending to poke at the fire with a stick, coughed to conceal his words and whispered, 'Crow's Foot,' under his breath. Bayaz was a good distance away, and the wind was still rustling in the trees. There was no way the Magus could have heard him.

Quai played his part well. He continued to peer at the root, brow knitted in thought. 'Is it Crow's Foot?' he ventured.

Bayaz raised an eyebrow. 'Why, yes it is. Well done, Malacus. And can you tell me its uses?'

Logen coughed again. 'Wounds,' he whispered, looking carelessly off into the bushes, one hand shielding his mouth. He might not know too much about

plants, but on the subject of wounds he had a wealth of experience.

‘I believe it’s good for wounds,’ said Quai slowly.

‘Excellent, Master Quai. Crow’s Foot is correct. And it is good for wounds. I am glad to see we are making some progress after all.’ He cleared his throat. ‘It does seem curious that you should use that name however. They only call this Crow’s Foot north of the mountains. I certainly never taught you that name. I wonder who it is you know, from that part of the world?’ He glanced over at Logen. ‘Have you ever considered a career in the magical arts, Master Ninefingers?’ He narrowed his eyes at Quai once more. ‘I may have space for an apprentice.’

Malacus hung his head. ‘Sorry, Master Bayaz.’

‘You are indeed. Perhaps you could clean the pots for us. That task may be better suited to your talents.’

Quai reluctantly shrugged off his blanket, collected the dirty bowls and shuffled off through the brush towards the stream. Bayaz bent over the pot on the fire, adding some dried-up leaves to the bubbling water. The flickering light of the flames caught the underside of his face, the steam curled around his bald head. All in all, he looked quite the part.

‘What is that?’ asked Logen, reaching for his pipe. ‘Some spell? Some potion? Some great work of High Art?’

‘Tea.’

‘Eh?’

‘Leaves of a certain plant, boiled up in water. It is considered quite a luxury in Gurkhul.’ He poured some of the brew out into a cup. ‘Would you like to try it?’

Logen sniffed at it suspiciously. ‘Smells like feet.’

‘Suit yourself.’ Bayaz shook his head and sat back down beside the fire, wrapping both hands around the steaming cup. ‘But you’re missing out on one of nature’s greatest gifts to man.’ He took a sip and smacked his lips in satisfaction. ‘Calming to the mind, invigorating to the body. There are few ills a good cup of tea won’t help with.’

Logen pressed a lump of chagga into the bowl of his pipe. ‘How about an axe in the head?’

‘That’s one of them,’ admitted Bayaz with a grin. ‘Tell me, Master Ninefingers, why all the blood between you and Bethod? Did you not fight for him many times? Why do you hate each other so?’

Logen paused as he was sucking smoke from the pipe, let his breath out. ‘There are reasons,’ he said stiffly. The wounds of that time were still raw. He didn’t like anyone picking at them.

‘Ah, reasons.’ Bayaz looked down at his tea-cup. ‘And what of your reasons? Does this feud not cut both ways?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘But you are willing to wait?’

‘I’ll have to be.’

‘Hmm. You are very patient, for a Northman.’

Logen thought of Bethod, and his loathsome sons, and the many good men they’d killed for their ambitions. The men he’d killed for their ambitions. He thought of the Shanka, and his family, and the ruins of the village by the sea.

He thought of all his dead friends. He sucked at his teeth and stared at the fire.

'I've settled a few scores in my time, but it only led to more.

Vengeance can feel fine, but it's a luxury. It doesn't fill your belly, or keep the rain off. To fight my enemies I need friends behind me, and I'm clean out of friends. You have to be realistic. It's been a while since my ambitions went beyond getting through each day alive.'

Bayaz laughed, his eyes glittering in the firelight. 'What?' asked Logen, handing the pipe across to him.

'No offence, but you are an endless source of surprises. Not at all what I was expecting. You are quite the riddle.'

'Me?'

'Oh yes! The Bloody-Nine,' he whispered, opening his eyes up wide. 'That's one bastard of a reputation you're carrying, my friend. The stories they tell! One bastard of a name! Why, mothers scare their children with it!' Logen said nothing. There was no denying it. Bayaz sucked slowly on the pipe, then blew out a long plume of smoke. 'I've been thinking about the day that Prince Calder paid us a visit.'

Logen snorted. 'I try not to spare him too much thought.'

'Nor I, but it wasn't his behaviour that interested me, it was yours.'

'It was? I don't remember doing a thing.'

Bayaz pointed the stem of the pipe at Logen from across the fire. 'Ah, but that is my point exactly. I have known many fighting men, soldiers and generals and champions and whatnot. A great fighter must act quickly, decisively, whether with his own arm or with an army, for he who strikes first often strikes last. So fighters come to rely on their baser instincts, to answer always with violence, to become proud and brutal.' Bayaz passed the pipe back to Logen. 'But whatever the stories, you are not such a one.'

'I know plenty who'd disagree.'

'Perhaps, but the fact remains, Calder slighted you, and you did nothing. So you know when you should act, and act quickly, but you also know when not to. That shows restraint, and a calculating mind.'

'Perhaps I was just afraid.'

'Of him? Come now. You didn't seem afraid of Scale and he's a deal more worrying. And you walked forty miles with my apprentice over your back, and that shows courage, and compassion too. A rare combination, indeed. Violence and restraint, calculation and compassion – and you speak to the spirits too.'

Logen raised an eyebrow. 'Not often, and only when there's no one else around. Their talk is dull, and not half so flattering as yours.'

'Hah. That's true. The spirits have little to say to men, I understand, though I have never spoken with them; I have not the gift. Few have these days.' He took another swallow from his cup, peering at Logen over the rim. 'I can scarcely think of another one alive.'

Malacus stumbled from the trees, shivering, and set the wet bowls down. He grabbed his blanket, wrapped it tightly around him, then peered hopefully at the steaming pot on the fire. 'Is that tea?'

Bayaz ignored him. 'Tell me, Master Ninefingers, in all the time since you arrived at my library, you have never once asked me why I sent for you, or

why now we are wandering through the North in peril of our lives. That strikes me as odd.'

'Not really. I don't want to know.'

'Don't want to?'

'All my life I've sought to know things. What's on the other side of the mountains? What are my enemies thinking? What weapons will they use against me? What friends can I trust?' Logen shrugged. 'Knowledge may be the root of power, but each new thing I've learned has left me worse off.' He sucked again on the pipe, but it was finished. He tapped the ashes out onto the ground. 'Whatever it is you want from me I will try to do, but I don't want to know until it's time. I'm sick of making my own decisions. They're never the right ones. Ignorance is the sweetest medicine, my father used to say. I don't want to know.'

Bayaz stared at him. It was the first time Logen had seen the First of the Magi look at all surprised. Malacus Quai cleared his throat. 'I'd like to know,' he said in a small voice, looking hopefully up at his master.

'Yes,' murmured Bayaz, 'but you don't get to ask.'

It was around midday that it all went wrong. Logen was just starting to think that they might make it to the Whiteflow, maybe even live out the week. It felt as if he lost his concentration for just a moment. Unfortunately, it was the one moment that mattered.

Still, it was well done, you had to give them that. They'd chosen their spot carefully, and tied rags around their horse's hooves, to muffle the sound. Threetrees might have seen it coming, if he'd been with them, but he had an eye for the ground like no other. The Dogman might have smelled them, if he'd been there, but he had the nose for it. The fact was, neither of them were there. The dead are no help at all.

There were three horsemen, waiting for them as they rounded a blind corner, well armed and armoured, dirty faces but clean weapons, veterans each man. The one on the right was thickset and powerful-looking, with almost no neck. The one on the left was tall and gaunt with small, hard eyes. Both of them had round helmets, coats of weathered mail, and long spears lowered and ready. Their leader sat on his horse like a bag of turnips, slouched in the saddle with the ease of the expert horseman. He nodded to Logen. 'Ninefingers! The Brynn! The Bloody-Nine! It's right good to see you again.'

'Blacktoe,' muttered Logen, forcing a friendly smile onto his face. 'It'd warm my heart to see you too, if things were different.'

'But they are as they are.' The old warrior's eyes moved slowly over Bayaz, Quai, and Logen as he spoke, taking in their weapons, or the lack of them, working out his game. A stupider opponent could have evened up the odds, but Blacktoe was a Named Man, and no fool. His eyes came to rest on Logen's hand as it crept slowly across his body towards the hilt of his sword, and he shook his head slowly. 'None of your tricks, Bloody-Nine. You can see we've got you.' And he nodded over at the trees behind them.

Logen's heart sank even lower. Two more riders had appeared and were trotting forwards to complete the trap, their muffled hooves barely making a sound on the soft ground by the road. Logen chewed his lip. Blacktoe was

right, damn him. The four horsemen closed in, lowered spear-points swaying, faces cold, minds set to the task. Malacus Quai stared at them with frightened eyes, his horse shying back. Bayaz smiled pleasantly as though they were his oldest friends. Logen would have liked a touch of the wizard's composure. His own heart was hammering, his mouth was sour.

Blacktoe nudged his horse forward, one hand gripping the shaft of his axe, the other resting on his knee, not even using the reins. He was a masterful horseman, famous for it. That's what happens when a man loses all his toes to the frost. Riding is quicker than walking, that has to be admitted, but when it came to fighting Logen preferred to keep his feet firmly on the ground. 'Better be coming with us now,' said the old warrior, 'better all round.'

Logen could hardly agree, but the odds were stacked high against him. A sword may have a voice, as Bayaz had said, but a spear is a damn good thing for poking a man off a horse, and there were four of them closing in around him. He was caught – outnumbered, off-guard, and with the wrong tools for the task. Yet again. Best to play for time, and hope some chance might show itself. Logen cleared his throat, doing his best to take the fear out of his voice. 'Never thought you'd make your peace with Bethod, Blacktoe, not you.'

The old warrior scratched at his long, matted beard. 'I was one of the last, truth be told, but I knelt in the end, same as all the rest. Can't say I liked it any, but there it is. Best let me have the blade, Ninefingers.'

'What about Old Man Yawl? You telling me he bows to Bethod? Or did you just find a master to suit you better?'

Blacktoe didn't get upset by the jibe, not in the least. He just looked sad, and tired. 'Yawl's dead, as though you didn't know. Most of 'em are. Bethod doesn't suit me much at all as a master, and nor do his sons. No man likes licking Scale's fat arse, or Calder's skinny one, you should know that. Now give up the sword, the day's wasting and we've ground to cover. We can talk just as well with you unarmed.'

'Yawl's dead?'

'Aye,' said Blacktoe suspiciously. 'He offered Bethod a duel. Didn't you hear? The Feared done for him.'

'Feared?'

'Where've you been, under a mountain?'

'More or less. What's this Feared?'

'I don't know what he is,' Blacktoe leaned from his saddle and spat in the grass. 'I heard he's not a man at all. They say that bitch Caurib dug him out from under a hill. Who knows? Leastways, he's Bethod's new champion, and far nastier even than the last, no offence.'

'None at all,' said Logen. The man with no neck had moved in close. A little too close perhaps, the point of his spear was hovering only a foot or two away. Close enough for Logen to grab a hold of. Maybe. 'Old Man Yawl was a strong hand.'

'Aye. That's why we followed him. But it done him no good. This Feared broke him. Broke him bad, like he was no more'n a dog. Left him alive, if you could call it that, so we could learn from his mistake, but he didn't live long. Most of us knelt right then, those with wives and sons to think on. No sense in putting it off. There's a few of them still, up in the mountains, who won't bow

to Bethod. That moon-worshipping madman Crummocki-Phail and his hillmen, and a few beside. But not many. And those there are, Bethod's got plans for.' Blacktoe held out a big, calloused hand. 'Better let me have the blade, Bloody-Nine. Left hand only, if you please, slow as slow and none of your tricks. Better all round.'

So that was it. Out of time. Logen wrapped the three fingers of his left hand round the hilt of his sword, the cold metal pressing into his palm. The big man's spear point edged a little closer. The tall one had relaxed a little, confident they had him. His spear was pointing up into the air, unready. There was no telling what the two behind were doing. The desire to glance over his shoulder was almost irresistible, but Logen forced himself to look ahead.

'I always had respect for you, Ninefingers, even though we stood on different sides. I've no feud with you. But Bethod wants vengeance, he's drunk on it, and I swore to serve.' Blacktoe looked him sadly in the eye. 'I'm sorry it's me. For what it's worth.'

'Likewise,' muttered Logen, 'I'm sorry it's you.' He slid the sword slowly from the scabbard. 'For what it's worth,' and he snapped his arm out, smashing the sword's pommel into Blacktoe's mouth. The old warrior gave a squawk as the dull metal crunched into his teeth and tumbled backwards out of the saddle, his axe flying from his hand and clattering into the road. Logen grabbed hold of the shaft of the big man's spear, just below the blade.

'Go!' he bellowed at Quai, but the apprentice only stared back, blinking. The man with no neck pulled hard at the spear, nearly jerking Logen out of the saddle, but he kept his grip. He reared up in the stirrups, raising the sword high above his head. Neckless took one hand from his spear, his eyes going wide, and held it up on an instinct. Logen swung the sword down with all his strength.

He was shocked by the sharpness of it. It took the big man's arm off just below the elbow then struck into his shoulder, cleaving through the fur and the mail beneath and splitting him to his stomach, near in half. Blood showered across the road, spattering in the face of Logen's horse. It was trained for riding but not for war and it reared and span around, kicking and plunging in a panic. It was the best Logen could do to stay on top of the damn thing. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bayaz smack Quai's horse on the rump, and it sped off with the apprentice bouncing in the saddle, the packhorse galloping along behind.

Then everything was a mess of plunging and snorting beasts, clashing and scraping metal, curses and cries. Battle. A familiar place, but no less terrifying for that. Logen clung to the reins with his right hand as his horse bucked and thrashed, swinging the sword wildly round his head, more to scare his enemies than hurt them. Every moment he expected the jolt and searing pain as he was stuck through with a spear, then the ground to rush up and smack him in the face.

He saw Quai and Bayaz galloping away down the road, hotly pursued by the tall man, his spear couched under his arm. He saw Blacktoe rolling to his feet, spitting blood, scrambling for his axe. He saw the two men who'd come from behind fighting for control of their own twisting horses, spears waving in their hands. He saw the body of the one he'd just killed loll in half and topple

slowly out of the saddle, blood pouring out over the muddy ground.

Logen squawked as he felt a spear-point dig into the back of his shoulder, and he was shoved forward, almost over his horse's head. Then he realised he was facing down the road, and still alive. He dug his heels into the flanks of his horse and it sped away, sending mud flying from its hooves and into the faces of the men behind. He fumbled the sword across into his right hand, nearly dropping the reins and falling into the road. He shrugged his shoulder but the wound didn't feel too bad – he could still move the arm alright.

'I'm still alive. Still alive.' The road flashed by beneath him, the wind stinging his eyes. He was making ground on the tall man – the rags on his horse's hooves were slowing him down now, slipping on the muddy ground. Logen gripped the hilt of the sword as hard as he could, raised it behind him. The head of his enemy snapped round, but too late. There was a hollow bonk of metal on metal as sword smashed into helmet, leaving a deep dent and sending the tall man sprawling. His head bounced once against the road, foot still caught in one stirrup, then he came free and tumbled over and over on the grass, arms and legs flopping. His riderless horse galloped on, eyes rolling at Logen as he passed.

'Still alive.' Logen looked over his shoulder. Blacktoe was back in the saddle and galloping after him, axe raised above his head, tangled hair flying out behind. The two other spearmen were with him, urging their horses forwards, but there was still some distance between them. Logen laughed. Perhaps he'd make it after all. He waved his sword at Blacktoe as the road entered a wood in the valley's bottom.

'I'm still alive!' he screamed at the top of his voice, and then his horse pulled up so suddenly that Logen was almost flung over its head. It was only by throwing one arm round its neck that he kept his seat at all. As soon as he fell back into the saddle he saw the problem, and it was a bad one.

Several tree trunks had been hauled across the road, their branches chopped off and the stumps filed down to vicious points, sticking out in all directions. Two more mailed Carls stood in front, spears at the ready. Even the best of horsemen couldn't have jumped that barrier, and Logen wasn't the best of horsemen. Bayaz and his apprentice had reached the same decision. Both sat still on their horses before the barricade, the old man looking puzzled, the young one simply scared.

Logen fingered the grip of his sword and cast desperately around, peering into the trees for some way out. He saw more men now. Archers. One, then two, then three of them, creeping slowly forward on both sides of the road, arrows nocked and strings drawn back.

Logen turned round in the saddle, but Blacktoe and his two companions were trotting up, there was no escape that way. They reined in a few strides away, well out of reach of Logen's sword. His shoulders slumped. The chase was done. Blacktoe leaned over and spat some blood onto the ground. 'Alright, Bloody-Nine, that's as far as you go.'

'Funny thing,' muttered Logen, looking down at the long grey blade of the sword, dashed and spattered with red. 'All that time I fought for Bethod against you, and now you fight for him against me. Seems we're never on the same side, and he's the only winner. Funny thing.'

‘Aye,’ mumbled Blacktoe through his bloody lips, ‘funny.’ But no one was laughing. Blacktoe and his Carls had faces hard as death, Quai looked on the verge of tears. Only Bayaz, for reasons beyond understanding, still had his customary good humour. ‘Alright, Ninefingers, get off the horse. Bethod wants you alive, but he’ll take you dead, if he has to. Down! Now!’

Logen’s thoughts began to turn to how they might escape, once he’d given up. Blacktoe wasn’t like to make a mistake once he had them. Logen would likely be kicked half to death for the fight he’d given them already, if they didn’t take his kneecaps off. They’d be trussed up tight like chickens for the slaughter. He pictured himself flung down on the stones with half a mile of chain around him, Bethod smiling down from his throne, Calder and Scale laughing, probably poking at him with something sharp.

Logen looked around. He looked at the cold arrowheads and the cold spear-points, and the cold eyes of the men pointing them. There was no way out of this little spot.

‘Alright, you win.’ Logen threw his sword down, point first. He had it in mind that it would bite into the soil and stand there, swaying back and forth, but it toppled over and clattered against the dirt. It was that sort of day. He slowly swung one leg over the saddle and slid down into the road.

‘That’s better. Now the rest of you.’ Quai instantly slithered off his horse and stood there, glancing nervously up at Bayaz, but the Magus made no move. Blacktoe frowned and hefted his axe. ‘You too, old man.’

‘I prefer to ride.’ Logen winced. That was not the right answer. Any moment now Blacktoe would give the order. The bowstrings would sing and the First of the Magi would drop into the road, stuck full of arrows, probably still with that infuriating smile on his dead face.

But the order never came. There was no word of command, no strange incantation, no arcane gestures. The air around Bayaz’ shoulders seemed to shimmer, like the air above the land on a hot day, and Logen felt a strange tugging at his guts.

Then the trees exploded in a wall of searing, blinding, white hot flame. Trunks burst and branches snapped with deafening cracks, venting plumes of brilliant fire and scalding steam. One burning arrow shot high up into the air over Logen’s head, and then the archers were gone, boiled away into the furnace.

Logen choked and gasped, reeled back in shock and terror, arm up to ward his face from the blistering heat. The barricade was sending up great goutts of fire and blinding sparks, the two men who had been standing near were rolling and thrashing, wreathed in hungry flames, their screams lost in the deafening roar.

The horses plunged and reeled, snorting with mad fear. Blacktoe was flung to the ground for the second time, his flaming axe flying from his hands, and his horse stumbled and fell, crashing down on top of him. One of his companions was even less lucky – thrown straight into the sheets of fire by the road, his despairing cry quickly cut off. Only one stayed upright, and he was lucky enough to be wearing gloves. By some miracle he kept hold of the burning shaft of his spear.

How he had the presence of mind to charge with the world on fire around

him, Logen would never know. Strange things can happen in a fight. He chose Quai as his target, bearing down on him with a snarl, the flaming spear aimed at his chest. The witless apprentice stood there helpless, rooted to the spot. Logen barrelled into him, snatching up his sword, sending Quai rolling across the road with his hands over his head, then he chopped mindlessly at the horse's legs as it flashed past him.

The blade was torn from his fingers and went skittering away, then a hoof slammed into Logen's injured shoulder and clubbed him into the dirt. The breath was knocked from him and the burning world span crazily around. His blow had its effect though. A few strides further down the road the horse's hacked front legs gave way and it stumbled, carried helplessly forward, tumbled and pitched into the flames, horse and rider vanishing together.

Logen cast about on the ground for the sword. Sizzling leaves whipped across the road, stinging his face and his hands. The heat was a great weight pressing down on him, pulling the sweat out of his skin. He found the bloody grip of the sword, seized hold of it with his torn fingers. He lurched up, staggered round, shouting meaningless sounds of fury, but there was no one left to fight. The flames were gone, as suddenly as they'd arrived, leaving Logen coughing and blinking in the curling smoke.

The silence seemed complete after the roaring noise, the gentle breeze felt icy cold. A wide circle of the trees around them had been reduced to charred and shattered stumps, as though they had burned for hours. The barricade was a sagging heap of grey ash and black splinters. Two corpses lay sprawled nearby, barely recognisable as men, burned down to the bones. The blackened blades of their spears lay in the road, the shafts vanished. Of the archers there was no sign at all. They were soot blown away on the wind. Quai lay motionless on his face with his hands over his head, and beyond him Blacktoe's horse lay sprawled out on its side, one leg silently twitching, the others still.

'Well,' said Bayaz, the muffled noise making Logen jump. He'd somehow expected there would never be another sound again. 'That's that.' The First of the Magi swung a leg over his saddle and slid down into the road. His horse stood there, calm and obedient. It hadn't moved the whole time. 'There now, Master Quai, do you see what can be achieved with a proper understanding of plants?'

Bayaz sounded calm, but his hands were trembling. Trembling badly. He looked haggard, ill, old, like a man who'd dragged a cart ten miles. Logen stared at him, swaying silently back and forth, the sword dangling from his hand.

'So that's Art, is it?' His voice sounded very small and far away.

Bayaz wiped the sweat from his face. 'Of a sort. Hardly very subtle. Still,' and he poked at one of the charred bodies with his boot, 'subtlety is wasted on the Northmen.' He grimaced, rubbed at his sunken eyes and peered up the road. 'Where the hell did those horses get to?'

Logen heard a ragged groan from the direction of Blacktoe's fallen mount. He stumbled towards it, tripped and fell to his knees, stumbled towards it again. His shoulder was a ball of pain, his left arm numb, his fingers ripped and bleeding, but Blacktoe was in worse shape. Much worse. He was propped

up on his elbows, legs crushed under his horse right to the hips, hands burned to swollen tatters. He had a look of profound puzzlement on his bloody face as he tried, unsuccessfully, to drag himself from under the horse.

'You've fucking killed me,' he whispered, staring open-mouthed at the wreckage of his hands. 'I'm all done. I'll never make it back, and even if I could, what for?' He gave a despairing laugh. 'Bethod ain't half so merciful as he used to be. Better you kill me now, before it starts to hurt. Better all round.' And he slumped back and lay in the road.

Logen looked up at Bayaz, but there was no help there. 'I'm not much at healing,' snapped the wizard, glancing round at the circle of blasted stumps. 'I told you we tend to specialise.' He closed his eyes and bent over, hands resting on his knees, breathing hard.

Logen thought of the floor in Bethod's hall, and the two princes, laughing and poking. 'Alright,' he muttered, standing up and hefting the sword. 'Alright.'

Blacktoe smiled. 'You were right, Ninefingers. I never should have knelt to Bethod. Never. Shit on him and his Feared. It would have been better to die up in the mountains, fighting him to the last. There might have been something fine in that. I just had enough. You can see that, can't you?'

'I can see that,' muttered Logen. 'I've had enough myself.'

'Something fine,' said Blacktoe, staring far up into the grey skies, 'I just had enough. So I reckon I earned this. Fair is fair.' He lifted his chin. 'Well then. Get it done, lad.'

Logen raised the sword.

'I'm glad it's you, Ninefingers,' hissed Blacktoe through gritted teeth, 'for what it's worth.'

'I'm not.' Logen swung the blade down.

The scorched stumps were still smouldering, smoke curling up into the air, but all was cold now. Logen's mouth tasted salty, like blood. Perhaps he bit his tongue somewhere. Perhaps it was someone else's. He threw the sword down and it bounced and clattered, shedding red specks across the dirt. Quai gaped around for a moment, then he folded up and coughed puke into the road. Logen stared down at Blacktoe's headless corpse. 'That was a good man. Better than me.'

'History is littered with dead good men.' Bayaz knelt stiffly and picked up the sword, wiped the blade on Blacktoe's coat, then he squinted up the road, peering through the haze of smoke. 'We should be moving. Others might be on their way.'

Logen looked at his bloody hands, slowly turning them over and over. They were his hands, no doubt. There was the missing finger. 'Nothing's changed,' he mumbled to himself.

Bayaz straightened up, brushing the dirt from his knees. 'When has it ever?' He held out the sword out to Logen, hilt first. 'I think you'll still be needing this.'

Logen stared at the blade for a moment. It was clean, dull grey, just as it had always been. Unlike him, it showed not so much as a scratch from the hard use it had seen that day. He didn't want it back. Not ever.

But he took it anyway.

PART II

'Life – the way it really is – is a battle not between good and bad, but between bad and worse'

Joseph Brodsky

What Freedom Looks Like

The point of the shovel bit into the ground with the sharp scrape of metal on earth. An all too familiar sound. It didn't bite in far, for all the effort put behind it, as the soil was rocky hard and baked by the sun.

But she wasn't to be deterred by a little hard soil.

She had dug too many holes, and in ground worse for digging than this.

When the fighting is over, you dig, if you're still alive. You dig graves for your dead comrades. A last mark of respect, however little you might have had for them. You dig as deep as you can be bothered, you dump them in, you cover them up, they rot away and are forgotten. That's the way it's always been.

She flicked her shoulder and sent a shovelful of sandy soil flying. Her eyes followed the grains of dirt and little stones as they broke apart in the air, then fell across the face of one of the soldiers. One eye stared at her reproachfully. The other had one of her arrows snapped off in it. A couple of flies were buzzing lazily around his face. There would be no burial for him, the graves were for her people. He and his bastard friends could lie out in the merciless sun.

After all, the vultures have to eat.

The blade of the shovel swished through the air and bit again into the soil. Another clump of dirt tumbled away. She straightened up and wiped the sweat from her face. She squinted up at the sky. The sun was blazing, straight above, sucking whatever moisture remained out of the dusty landscape, drying the blood on the rocks. She looked at the two graves beside her. One more to go. She would finish this one, throw the earth on top of those three fools, rest for a moment, then away.

Others would be coming for her soon enough.

She stuck the shovel into the earth, took hold of the water skin and pulled the stopper out. She took a few lukewarm swallows, even allowed herself the luxury of pouring a trickle out into her grimy hand and splashing it on her face. The early deaths of her comrades had at least put a stop to the endless squabbling over water.

There would be plenty to go round now.

'Water . . .' gasped the soldier by the rocks. It was surprising, but he was still alive. Her arrow had missed his heart but it had killed him still – just a little less quickly than she had intended. He had managed to drag himself as far as the rocks, but his crawling days were over. The stones around him were coated in dark blood. The heat and that arrow would do for him soon, however tough he was.

She wasn't thirsty, but there was water to spare and she wouldn't be able to carry it all. She took a few more swallows, letting it slosh out of her mouth and down her neck. A rare treat out here in the Badlands, to let water fall.

Shining drops splattered onto the dry earth, turning it dark. She splashed some more on her face, licked her lips, and looked over at the soldier.

'Mercy . . .' he croaked, one hand clasped to his chest where the arrow was sticking out of it, the other stretched weakly towards her.

'Mercy? Hah!' She pushed the stopper back into the skin, then tossed it down next to the grave. 'Don't you know who I am?' She grabbed hold of the handle of the shovel, the point of its blade bit once more into the earth.

'Ferro Maljinn!' came a voice from somewhere behind her, 'I know who you are!'

A most unwelcome development.

She swung the shovel again, mind racing. Her bow was lying just out of reach on the ground by the first grave she had dug. She threw some dirt away, her sweating shoulders prickling at the unseen presence. She glanced over at the dying soldier. He was staring at a point behind her, and that gave her a good idea where this new arrival was standing.

She dug the point of the shovel in again, then let go and sprang forward out of the hole, rolling across the dirt, snatching up her bow as she moved, notching an arrow, drawing back the string in one smooth motion. An old man was standing about ten strides away. He was making no move forward, was holding no weapon. He was just standing, looking at her with a benign smile.

She let the arrow fly.

Now Ferro was about as deadly with a bow as it's possible to be. The ten dead soldiers could have testified to that, if they'd been able. Six of them had her arrows sticking out of them, and in that fight she hadn't missed once. She couldn't remember missing at close range, however quickly the shot had been taken, and she'd killed men ten times further away than this smiling old bastard was now.

But this time she missed.

The arrow seemed to curve in the air. A bad feather maybe, but it still didn't seem quite right. The old man didn't flinch, not even a hair. He simply stood, smiling, exactly where he'd always stood, and the arrow missed him by a few inches and disappeared off down the hillside.

And that gave everyone time to consider the situation.

He was a strange one, this old man. Very dark-skinned, black as coal, which meant he was from the far south, across the wide and shelterless desert. That's a journey not lightly taken, and Ferro had rarely seen such people. Tall and thin with long, sinewy arms and a simple robe wrapped round him. There were strange bangles round his wrists, stacked up so they covered half his fore-arms, glittering dark and light in the savage sun.

His hair was a mass of grey ropes about his face, some hanging down as low as his waist, and there was a grey stubble on his lean, pointed jaw. He had a big water skin wrapped around his chest, and a bunch of leather bags hanging from a belt around his waist. Nothing else. No weapon. That was the strangest thing of all, for a man out here in the Badlands. No one came to this god-forsaken place except those who were running, and those sent to hunt them. In either case, they should be well armed.

He was no soldier of Gurkhul, he was no scum come looking for the money on her head. He was no bandit, no escaped slave. What was he then? And why

was he here? He must have come for her. He could be one of them.

An Eater.

Who else would wander the Badlands without a weapon? She hadn't realised they wanted her that badly.

He stood there motionless, the old man, smiling at her. She reached slowly for another arrow, and his eyes followed her without any worry.

'That really isn't necessary,' he said, in a slow, deep voice.

She nocked the arrow to her bow. The old man didn't move. She shrugged her shoulders and took her time aiming. The old man smiled on, not a care in the world. She let the arrow fly. It missed him by a few inches again, this time on the other side, and shot off down the hillside.

Once was a possibility, she had to admit that, but twice was wrong. If Ferro knew one thing, and one thing only, she knew how to kill. The old fool should have been stuck through and bleeding out his last into the stony soil. Now, simply by standing still and smiling, he seemed to be saying, 'You know less than you think. I know more.'

That was very galling.

'Who are you, you old bastard?'

'They call me Yulwei.'

'Old bastard will do for you!' She tossed her bow down on the ground, let her arms drop to her sides so that her right hand was hidden from him by her body. She twisted her wrist and the curved knife dropped out of her sleeve and into her waiting palm. There are many ways to kill a man, and if one way fails you must try another.

Ferro had never been one to give up at the first stumble.

Yulwei began to move slowly towards her, his bare feet padding on the rocks, bangles jingling softly together. That was very strange, now she thought about it. If he made a noise every time he moved, how had he managed to sneak up on her?

'What do you want?'

'I want to help you.' He came forward, until he was just over an arm's length away, then he stopped and stood, grinning at her.

Now Ferro was fast as a snake with a knife and twice as deadly, as the last of those soldiers could have testified, had he been able. The blade was a shining blur in the air, swung with all her strength and all her fury behind it. If he had been standing where she thought he was, his head would have been hanging off. Only he wasn't. He was standing about a stride to the left.

She threw herself at him with a fighting scream, ramming the glittering point of the knife into his heart. But she stabbed only air. He was back where he had been before, motionless and smiling all the while. Very strange. She padded round him, cautious, sandaled feet scuffing in the dust, left hand circling in the air in front of her, right hand gripped tight round the handle of the knife. She had to be careful – there was magic here.

'There is no need to get angry. I am here to help.'

'Fuck your help,' she hissed back at him.

'But you need it, and badly. They are coming for you, Ferro. There are soldiers in the hills, many soldiers.'

'I'll outrun them.'

'There are too many. You cannot outrun them all.'

She glanced round at the punctured bodies. 'Then I'll give them to the vultures.'

'Not this time. They are not alone. They have help.' On the word 'help' his deep voice dropped even lower.

Ferro frowned. 'Priests?'

'Yes, and more besides.' His eyes went very wide. 'An Eater,' he whispered. 'They mean to take you alive. The Emperor wants to make an example of you. He has it in mind to put you on display.'

She snorted. 'Fuck the Emperor.'

'I heard you already did.'

She growled and raised the knife again, but it was not a knife. There was a hissing snake in her hand, a deadly snake, with its mouth open to bite. 'Ugh!' She threw it on the ground, stamped her foot down on its head, but she stamped on her knife instead. The blade snapped with a sharp crack.

'They will catch you,' said the old man. 'They will catch you, and they will break your legs with hammers in the city square, so you can never run again. Then they will parade you through the streets of Shaffa, naked, sitting backwards on an ass, with your hair shaved off, while the people line the streets and shout insults at you.'

She frowned at him, but Yulwei did not stop. 'They will starve you to death in a cage before the palace, cooking in the hot sun, while the good people of Gurkhul taunt you and spit on you and throw dung at you through the bars. Perhaps they will give you piss to drink, if you are lucky. When you finally die they will let you rot, and the flies will eat you bit by bit, and all the other slaves will see what freedom looks like, and decide they are better off as they are.'

Ferro was bored with this. Let them come, and the Eater too. She wouldn't die in a cage. She would cut her own throat, if it came to that. She turned her back on him with a scowl and snatched up the shovel, started digging away furiously at the last grave. Soon it was deep enough.

Deep enough for the scum who'd be rotting in it.

She turned around. Yulwei was kneeling down by the dying soldier, giving him water from the skin round his chest.

'Fuck!' she shouted, striding over, her fingers locked around the handle of the shovel.

The old man got to his feet as she came close. 'Mercy ...' croaked the soldier, stretching out his hand.

'I'll give you mercy!' The edge of the shovel bit deep into the soldier's skull. The body twitched briefly then was still. She turned to the old man with a look of triumph. He stared back sadly. There was something in his eyes. Pity, maybe.

'What do you want, Ferro Maljinn?'

'What?'

'Why did you do that?' Yulwei pointed down at the dead man. 'What do you want?'

'Vengeance.' She spat out the word.

'On all of them? On the whole nation of Gurkhul? Every man, woman and

child?’

‘All of them!’

The old man looked round the corpses. ‘Then you must be very happy with today’s work.’

She forced a smile onto her face. ‘Yes.’ But she wasn’t very happy. She couldn’t remember what it felt like. The smile seemed strange, unfamiliar, all lop-sided.

‘And is vengeance all you think of, every minute of every day, your only desire?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hurting *them*? Killing *them*? Ending *them*?’

‘Yes!’

‘You want nothing for yourself?’

She paused. ‘What?’

‘For yourself. What do *you* want?’

She stared at the old man suspiciously, but no reply came to her. Yulwei shook his head sadly. ‘It seems to me, Ferro Maljinn, that you are as much a slave as you ever were. Or ever could be.’ He sat down, cross-legged on a rock.

She stared at him for a moment, confused. Then the anger bubbled up again, hot and reassuring. ‘If you came to help me, you can help me bury them!’ She pointed over at the three bloody corpses, lined up next to the graves.

‘Oh no. That is your work.’

She turned away from the old man, cursing under her breath, and moved over to her one-time companions. She took Shebed’s corpse under the arms and hauled him over to the first grave, his heels making two little grooves in the dust. When she made it to the hole she rolled him in. Alugai was next. A stream of dry soil ran over him as he came to rest in the bottom of his grave.

She turned to Nasar’s carcass. He had been killed by a sword cut across the face. Ferro thought it was something of an improvement to his looks.

‘That one looks a good sort,’ said Yulwei.

‘Nasar.’ She laughed without amusement. ‘A raper, a thief, a coward.’ She hawked up some phlegm and spat into his dead face. It splattered softly against his forehead. ‘Much the worst of the three.’ She looked down at the graves. ‘But they were all of them shit.’

‘Nice company you keep.’

‘The hunted don’t have the luxury of choosing their companions.’ She stared at Nasar’s bloody face. ‘You take what’s offered.’

‘If you disliked them so much, why don’t you leave them for the vultures, like you have these others?’ Yulwei swept his arm over the broken soldiers on the ground.

‘You bury your own.’ She kicked Nasar into the hole. He rolled forward, arms flopping, and dropped into the grave face down. ‘That’s the way it’s always been.’

She grabbed hold of the shovel and started to heap the stony earth onto his back. She worked in silence, the sweat building up on her face, then dripping off onto the ground. Yulwei watched her as the holes filled up. Three more piles of dirt in the wasteland. She threw the shovel away and it bounced off

one of the corpses and clattered among the stones. A small cloud of black flies buzzed angrily off the body, then returned.

Ferro picked up her bow and arrows and slung them over her shoulder. She took the water skin, checked its weight carefully, then shouldered that also. Then she picked over the bodies of the soldiers. One of them, he looked like the leader, had a fine curved sword. He hadn't even managed to draw it before her arrow had caught him in the throat. Ferro drew it now, and she tested it with a couple of sweeps through the air. It was very good: well balanced, the long blade glittering deadly sharp, bright metal on the hilt catching the sun. He had a knife as well that matched it. She took the weapons and stuck them through her belt.

She picked over the other bodies, but there wasn't much to take. She cut her arrows from the corpses where she could. She found some coins and tossed them away. They would only weigh her down, and what would she buy out here in the Badlands? Dirt?

That was all there was, and it was free.

They had a few scraps of food with them, but not enough even for another day. That meant there must be others, probably lots of them, and not far away. Yulwei was telling the truth, but it made no difference to her.

She turned and started to walk southward, down off the hill and towards the great desert, leaving the old man behind.

'That's the wrong way,' he said.

She stopped, squinting at him in the bright sun. 'Aren't the soldiers coming?'

Yulwei's eyes sparkled. 'There are many ways of staying unnoticed, even out here in the Badlands.'

She looked to the north, out over the featureless plain below. Out towards Gurkhul. There wasn't a hill, or a tree, or scarcely a bush for miles. Nowhere to hide. 'Unnoticed, even by an Eater?'

The old man laughed. 'Especially by those arrogant swine. They're not half as clever as they think they are. How do you think I got here? I came through them, between them, around them. I go where I please, and I take who I please with me.'

She shaded her eyes with her hand, and squinted southward. The desert stretched away into the far distance, and beyond. Ferro could survive here in the wilderness, just about, but out there in that crucible of changing sands and merciless heat?

The old man seemed to read her thoughts. 'There are always the endless sands. I have crossed them before. It can be done. But not by you.'

He was right, damn him. Ferro was lean and tough as a bowstring, but that just meant she would walk in circles a little longer before pitching on her face. The desert was preferable to the cage before the palace as a place to die, but not by much. She wanted to stay alive.

There were still things to do.

The old man sat there, cross-legged, smiling. What was he? Ferro trusted no one, but if he meant to deliver her to the Emperor, he could have knocked her on the head while she was digging, instead of announcing his arrival. He had magic, she had seen that for herself, and some chance was better than none.

But what would he want in return? The world had never given Ferro

anything for free, and she didn't expect it to begin now. She narrowed her eyes. 'What do you want from me, Yulwei?'

The old man laughed. That laugh was becoming very annoying. 'Let us just say that I will have done you a favour. Later on, you can do me one in return.'

That answer was horribly thin on the details, but when your life's on the table you have to take whatever's offered. She hated to place herself in the power of another, but it seemed she had no choice.

Not if she wanted to live out the week, that is.

'What do we do?'

'We must wait for nightfall.' Yulwei glanced at the twisted bodies scattered about the ground, and wrinkled his nose. 'But perhaps not here.'

Ferro shrugged and sat herself down on the middle grave. 'Here will do,' she said, 'I've a mind to watch the vultures eat.'

Overhead the clear night sky was scattered with bright stars, and the air had turned cool, cold even. Down on the dark and dusty plain below, fires were burning, a curved line of fires that seemed to hem them in against the edge of the desert. She, Yulwei, the ten corpses and the three graves were trapped on the hillside. Tomorrow, as the first light crept over the arid land, the soldiers would leave those fires and creep carefully towards the hills. If Ferro was still there when they arrived, she would be killed for sure, or worse still captured. She could not fight that many on her own, even supposing there was no Eater with them.

She hated to admit it, but her life was in Yulwei's hands now.

He squinted up at the starry sky. 'It is time,' he said.

They scrambled down the rocky hillside in the darkness, picking their way carefully among the boulders and the odd, scrubby, half-dead bush. Northward, towards Gurkhul. Yulwei moved surprisingly fast and she was forced to half-run to keep up, eyes fixed on the ground to find her footing among the dry rocks. When they finally reached the base of the hill and she looked up, she saw that Yulwei was leading her toward the left hand edge of the line, where the fires were most numerous.

'Wait,' she whispered, grabbing his shoulder. She pointed over to the right hand side. There were fewer fires there, and it would be easier to slip between them. 'What about that way?'

She could just see Yulwei's teeth smiling white in the starlight. 'Oh no, Ferro Maljinn. That is where most of the soldiers are . . . and our other friend.' He was making no attempt to keep his voice down, and it was making her jumpy. 'That is where they expect you to come through, if you choose to go north. But they do not expect you. They think you will go south into the desert to die, rather than risk being captured, as indeed you would have done, had I not been here.'

Yulwei turned and moved off and she crept after him, keeping low to the ground. As they drew nearer to the fires she saw that the old man had been right. There were figures sitting around some of them, but they were thinly spread. The old man strode confidently toward four fires on the far left, only one of them manned. He made no effort to stay low, his bangles jingled softly together, his bare feet flapped loud on the dry earth. They were almost close enough to see the features of the three men round the fire. Yulwei would

surely be seen at any moment. She hissed at him to grab his attention, sure that she would be heard.

Yulwei turned round, looking puzzled in the faint light from the flames. 'What?' he said. She winced, waiting for the soldiers to leap up, but they chattered on regardless. Yulwei looked over at them. 'They will not see us, nor hear us either, unless you start shouting in their ears. We are safe.' He turned and walked on, giving the soldiers a wide berth. Ferro followed, still keeping low and quiet, if only out of habit.

As Ferro came closer she began to make out the words of the soldier's conversation. She slowed, listening. She turned. She started to move towards the fire. Yulwei looked round. 'What are you doing?' he asked.

Ferro looked at the three of them. A big, tough-looking veteran, a thin, weaselly type, and an honest-seeming young man, who didn't look much like a soldier. Their weapons were lying around, sheathed, wrapped up, unready. She circled them warily, listening.

'They say she's not right in the head,' the thin one was whispering at the young one, trying to scare him, 'they say she's killed a hundred men, or more. If you're a good looking fella, she cuts your fruits off while you're still alive,' he grabbed hold of his crotch, 'and eats them in front of you!'

'Ah, stop your mouth,' said the big one, 'she won't be coming near us.' He pointed over to where the fires were sparser, his voice dropping to a whisper. 'She'll be going to *him*, if she comes this way at all.'

'Well, I hope she doesn't,' said the young one, 'live and let live, say I.'

The thin man frowned. 'And what about all the good men she's killed? And women and children too? Shouldn't they have been let live?' Ferro's teeth ground together. She'd never killed children, that she could think of.

'Well, it's a shame for them, of course. I'm not saying she shouldn't be caught.' The young soldier glanced around nervously. 'Just maybe not by us.'

The big man let go a laugh at that, but the thin one didn't look amused. 'You a coward?'

'No!' said the young man, angrily, 'but I got a wife and a family depending on me, and I could do without being killed out here, that's all.' He grinned. 'We're expecting another child. Hoping for a son this time.'

The big man nodded. 'My son's nearly grown now. They get old so quick.'

Talk of children, and families, and hopes only made the fury in Ferro's chest squeeze harder. Why should they be allowed a life, when she had nothing? When them and their kind had taken everything from her? She slid the curved knife out of its sheath.

'What are you doing, Ferro?' hissed Yulwei.

The young man looked round. 'Did you hear something?'

The big one laughed. 'I think I heard you shit yourself.' The thin one chuckled to himself, the young man smiled, embarrassed. Ferro crept right up behind him. She was just a foot or two away, brightly lit by the fire, but none of the soldiers even glanced at her. She raised the knife.

'Ferro!' shouted Yulwei. The young man sprang to his feet, he peered out across the dark plain, squinting, brow furrowed. He looked Ferro right in the face, but his eyes were focused far behind her. She could smell his breath. The blade of the knife glittered an inch or less from his stubbly throat.

Now. Now was the time. She could kill him quickly, and take the other two as well before the alarm was raised. She knew she could do it. They were unprepared, and she was ready. Now was the time.

But her hand didn't move.

'What's got up your arse?' asked the big soldier. 'There's nothing out there.'

'Could've sworn I heard something,' said the young man, still looking right in her face.

'Wait!' shouted the thin one, jumping to his feet and pointing. 'There she is! Right in front of you!' Ferro froze for an instant, staring at him, then he and the big man started to laugh. The young soldier looked sheepish, turned around and sat down.

'I thought I heard something, that's all.'

'There's no one out there,' said the big man. Ferro began to back slowly away. She felt sick, her mouth full of sour spit, her head thumping. She pushed the knife back into its sheath, turned and stumbled off with Yulwei following silently behind.

When the light of the fires and the sound of the talking had faded into the distance she stopped and dropped down on the hard ground. A cold wind blew up across the barren plain. It blew stinging dust in her face, but she hardly noticed. The hate and the fury were gone, for the time being, but they had left a hole, and she had nothing else to fill it with. She felt empty and cold and sick and alone. She hugged herself, rocking slowly back and forth, and closed her eyes. But the darkness held no comfort.

Then she felt the old man's hand press onto her shoulder.

Now normally she would have twisted away, thrown him off, killed him if she could. But the strength was all gone. She looked up, blinking. 'There's nothing left of me. What am I?' She pressed one hand on her chest, but she barely felt it. 'I have nothing inside.'

'Well. It's strange that you should say that.' Yulwei smiled up at the starry sky. 'I was just starting to think there might be something in there worth saving.'

The King's Justice

As soon as he reached the Square of Marshals, Jezal realised there was something wrong. It was never half this busy for a meeting of the Open Council. He glanced over the knots of finely dressed people as he hurried by, slightly late and out of breath from his long training session: voices were hushed, faces tense and expectant.

He shouldered his way through the crowd to the Lord's Round, glancing suspiciously up at the guards flanking the inlaid doors. They at least seemed the same as ever, their heavy visors giving nothing away. He crossed the ante-chamber, vivid tapestries flapping slightly in the draught, slipped through the inner doors and passed into the vast, cool space beyond. His footsteps made tapping echoes in the gilded dome as he hurried down the aisle towards the high table. Jalenhorm was standing beneath one of the tall windows, face splashed with coloured light from the stained glass, frowning at a bench with a metal rail along its base which had been placed to one side of the floor.

'What's going on?'

'Haven't you heard?' Jalenhorm's voice was whispery with excitement. 'Hoff's let it be known there'll be some great matter to discuss.'

'What is it? Angland? The Northmen?'

The big man shook his head. 'Don't know, but we'll soon see.'

Jezal frowned. 'I don't like surprises.' His eye came to rest on the mysterious bench. 'What's that for?'

At that moment the great doors were swung open and a stream of councillors began to flood down the aisle. The usual mixture, Jezal supposed, if a little more purposeful. The younger sons, the paid representatives . . . he caught his breath. There was a tall man at the front, richly dressed even in this august company, with a weighty golden chain across his shoulders and a weighty frown across his face.

'Lord Brock himself,' whispered Jezal.

'And there's Lord Isher.' Jalenhorm nodded at a sedate old man just behind Brock, 'and Heugen, and Barezin. It's something big. It has to be.'

Jezal took a deep breath as four of the Union's most powerful noblemen arranged themselves on the front row. He had never seen the Open Council half so well attended. On the councillors' half-circle of benches there was barely an empty seat. High above them, the public gallery was an unbroken ring of nervous faces.

Now Hoff blustered through the doors and down the aisle, and he was not alone. On his right a tall man flowed along, slender and proud-looking with a long, spotless white coat and a shock of white hair. Arch Lector Sult. On his left walked another man, leaning heavily on a stick, slightly bent in a robe of black and gold with a long grey beard. High Justice Marovia. Jezal could hardly believe his eyes. Three members of the Closed Council, here.

Jalenhorm hurried to take his place as the clerks deposited their burdens of ledgers and papers on the polished tabletop. The Lord Chamberlain threw himself down in their midst and immediately called for wine. The head of his Majesty's Inquisition swept into a high chair on one side of him, smiling faintly to himself. High Justice Marovia lowered himself slowly into another, frowning all the while. The volume of the anxious whispering in the hall rose a step, the faces of the great magnates on the front row were grim and suspicious. The Announcer took his place before the table, not the usual brightly dressed imbecile, but a dark, bearded man with a barrel chest. He lifted his staff high, then beat it against the tiles, fit to wake the dead.

'I call this meeting of the Open Council of the Union to order!' he bellowed. The hubbub gradually died away.

'There is but one matter for discussion this morning,' said the Lord Chamberlain, peering sternly at the house from beneath his heavy brows, 'a matter of the King's Justice.' There were scattered mutterings. 'A matter concerning the royal licence for trade in the city of Westport.' The noise increased: angry whispers, uncomfortable shufflings of noble arses on their benches, the familiar scratching of quills on the great ledgers. Jezal saw Lord Brock's brows draw together, the corners of Lord Heugen's mouth turn down. They did not seem to like the taste of this. The Lord Chamberlain sniffed and took a swig of wine, waiting for the muttering to die away. 'I am not best qualified to speak on this matter, however—'

'No indeed!' snapped Lord Isher sharply, shifting in his seat on the front row with a scowl.

Hoff fixed the old man with his eye. 'So I call on a man who is! My colleague from the Closed Council, Arch Lector Sult.'

'The Open Council recognises Arch Lector Sult!' thundered the Announcer, as the head of the Inquisition made his graceful way down the steps of the dais and onto the tiled floor, smiling pleasantly at the angry faces turned towards him.

'My Lords,' he began, in a slow, musical voice, ushering his words out into space with smooth movements of his hands, 'for the past seven years, ever since our glorious victory in the war with Gurkhul, an exclusive royal licence for trade in the city of Westport has been in the hands of the honourable Guild of Mercers.'

'And a fine job they've done of it!' shouted Lord Heugen.

'They won us that war!' growled Barezin, pounding the bench beside him with a meaty fist.

'A fine job!'

'Fine!' came the cries.

The Arch Lector nodded as he waited for the noise to fade. 'Indeed they have,' he said, pacing across the tiles like a dancer, his words scratching their way across the pages of the books. 'I would be the last to deny it. A fine job.' He spun suddenly around, the tails of his white coat snapping, his face twisted into a brutal snarl. 'A fine job of dodging the King's taxes!' he screamed. There was a collective gasp.

'A fine job of slighting the King's law!' Another gasp, louder.

'A fine job of high treason!' There was a storm of protest, of fists shaken in

the air and papers thrown to the floor. Livid faces stared down from the public gallery, florid ones ranted and bellowed from the benches before the high table. Jezal stared about him, unsure if he could have heard correctly.

‘How dare you, Sult!’ Lord Brock roared at the Arch Lector as he swished back up the steps of the dais, a faint smile clinging to his lips.

‘We demand proof!’ bellowed Lord Heugen. ‘We demand justice!’

‘The King’s Justice!’ came cries from the back.

‘You must supply us with proof!’ shouted Isher, as the noise began to fade.

The Arch Lector twitched out his white gown, the fine material billowing around him as he swung himself smoothly back into his chair. ‘Oh but that is our intention, Lord Isher!’

The heavy bolt of a small side door was flung back with an echoing bang. There was a rustling as Lords and proxies twisted round, stood up, squinted over to see what was happening. People in the public gallery peered out over the parapet, leaning dangerously far in their eagerness to see. The hall fell quiet. Jezal swallowed. There was a scraping, tapping, clinking sound beyond the doorway, then a strange and sinister procession emerged from the darkness.

Sand dan Glokta came first, limping as always and leaning heavily on his cane, but with his head held high and a twisted, toothless grin on his hollow face. Three men shuffled behind him, chained together by their hands and bare feet, clinking and rattling their way towards the high table. Their heads were shaved bare and they were dressed in brown sackcloth. The clothing of the penitent. Confessed traitors.

The first of the prisoners was licking his lips, eyes darting here and there, pale with terror. The second, shorter and thicker-set, was stumbling, dragging his left leg behind him, hunched over with his mouth hanging open. As Jezal watched, a thin line of pink drool dangled from his lip and splattered on the tiles. The third man, painfully thin and with huge dark rings round his eyes, stared slowly around, blinking, eyes wide but apparently taking nothing in. Jezal recognised the man behind the three prisoners straight away: the big albino from that night in the street. Jezal rocked his weight from one foot to the other, feeling suddenly cold and uncomfortable.

The purpose of the bench was now made clear. The three prisoners slumped down on it, the albino knelt and snapped their manacles shut around the rail along its base. The chamber was entirely silent. Every eye was fixed on the crippled Inquisitor, and his three prisoners.

‘Our investigation began some months ago,’ said Arch Lector Sult, immensely smug at having the assembly so completely under his control. ‘A simple matter of some irregular accounting, I won’t bore you with the details.’ He smiled at Brock, at Isher, at Barezin. ‘I know you all are very busy men. Who could have thought then, that such a little matter would lead us here? Who would suppose that the roots of treason could run so very deep?’

‘Indeed,’ said the Lord Chamberlain impatiently, looking up from his goblet. ‘Inquisitor Glokta, the floor is yours.’

The Announcer struck his staff on the tiles. ‘The Open Council of the Union recognises Sand dan Glokta, Inquisitor Exempt!’

The cripple waited politely for the scratching of the clerk’s quills to finish,

leaning on his cane in the centre of the floor, seemingly unmoved by the importance of the occasion. 'Rise and face the Open Council,' he said, turning to the first of his prisoners.

The terrified man sprang up, his chains rattling, licking his pale lips, goggling at the faces of the Lords in the front row. 'Your name?' demanded Glokta.

'Salem Rews.'

Jezal felt a catch in his throat. Salem Rews? He knew the man! His father had had dealings with him in the past, at one time he had been a regular visitor to their estate! Jezal studied the terrified, shaven-headed traitor with increasing horror. He cast his mind back to the plump, well-dressed merchant, always ready with a joke. It was him, no doubt. Their eyes met for an instant and Jezal looked anxiously away. His father had talked with that man in their hallway! Had shaken hands with him! Accusations of treason are like illnesses – you can catch them just by being in the same room! His eyes were drawn inevitably back to that unfamiliar, yet horribly familiar face. How dare he be a traitor, the bastard?

'You are a member of the honourable Guild of Mercers?' continued Glokta, putting a sneering accent into the word 'honourable'.

'I was,' mumbled Rews.

'What was your role within the Guild?' The shaven-headed Mercer stared desperately about him. 'Your role?' demanded Glokta, his voice taking on a hard edge.

'I conspired to defraud the King!' cried the merchant, wringing his hands. A wave of shock ran round the hall. Jezal swallowed sour spit. He saw Sult smirking across at High Justice Marovia. The old man's face was stony blank, but his fists were clenched tight on the table before him. 'I committed treason! For money! I smuggled, and I bribed, and I lied . . . we were all at it!'

'All at it!' Glokta leered round at the assembly. 'And if any of you should doubt it, we have ledgers, and we have documents, and we have numbers. There is a room in the House of Questions stuffed with them. A room full of secrets, and guilt, and lies.' He slowly shook his head. 'Sorry reading, I can tell you.'

'I had to do it!' screamed Rews. 'They made me! I had no choice!'

The crippled Inquisitor frowned at his audience. 'Of course they made you. We realise you were but a single brick in this house of infamy. An attempt was made on your life recently, was it not?'

'They tried to kill me!'

'Who tried?'

'It was this man!' wailed Rews, voice cracking, pointing a trembling finger at the prisoner next to him, pulling away as far as the chains that linked them would allow. 'It was him! Him!' The manacles rattled as he waved his arm, spit flying from his mouth. There was another surge of angry voices, louder this time. Jezal watched the head of the middle prisoner sag and he slumped sideways, but the hulking albino grabbed him and hauled him back upright.

'Wake up, Master Carpi!' shouted Glokta. The lolling head came slowly up. An unfamiliar face, strangely swollen and badly pocked with acne-scars. Jezal noticed with disgust that his four front teeth were missing. Just like Glokta's.

‘You are from Talins, yes, in Styria?’ The man nodded slowly, stupidly, like someone half asleep. ‘You are paid to kill people, yes?’ He nodded again. ‘And you were hired to murder ten of his Majesty’s subjects, among them this confessed traitor, Salem Rews?’ A trickle of blood ran slowly out from the man’s nose and his eyes started to roll back in his head. The albino shook him by the shoulder and he came round, nodding groggily. ‘What became of the other nine?’ Silence. ‘You killed them, did you not?’ Another nod, a strange clicking sound coming from the prisoner’s throat.

Glokta frowned slowly around the rapt faces of the Council. ‘Villem dan Robb, customs official, throat cut ear to ear.’ He slid a finger across his neck and a woman in the gallery squealed. ‘Solimo Scandi, Mercer, stabbed in the back four times.’ He thrust up four fingers, then pressed them to his stomach as though sickened. ‘The bloody list goes on. All murdered, for nothing but a bigger profit. Who hired you?’

‘Him,’ croaked the killer, turning his swollen face to look at the gaunt man with the glassy eyes, slumped on the bench next to him, heedless of his surroundings. Glokta limped over, cane tapping on the tiles.

‘What is your name?’

The prisoner’s head snapped up, his eyes focusing on the twisted face of the Inquisitor above him. ‘Gofred Hornlach!’ he answered instantly, voice shrill.

‘You are a senior member of the Guild of Mercers?’

‘Yes!’ he barked, blinking mindlessly up at Glokta.

‘One of Magister Kault’s deputies, in fact?’

‘Yes!’

‘Have you conspired with other Mercers to defraud his Majesty the King? Did you hire an assassin to murder ten of his Majesty’s subjects?’

‘Yes! Yes!’

‘Why?’

‘We were worried they would tell what they knew . . . tell what they knew . . . tell . . .’ Hornlach’s empty eyes stared off towards one of the coloured windows. His mouth slowly stopped moving.

‘Tell what they knew?’ prompted the Inquisitor.

‘About the treasonous activities of the Guild!’ the Mercer blurted, ‘about our treasons! About the activities of the guild . . . treasonous ... activities ...’

Glokta cut in sharply. ‘Were you acting alone?’

‘No! No!’

The Inquisitor rapped his cane down before him and leaned forward. ‘Who gave the orders?’ he hissed.

‘Magister Kault!’ shouted Hornlach instantly, ‘he gave the orders!’ The audience gasped. Arch Lector Sult smirked a little wider. ‘It was the Magister!’ The quills scratched mercilessly. ‘It was Kault! He gave the orders! All the orders! Magister Kault!’

‘Thank you, Master Hornlach.’

‘The Magister! He gave the orders! Magister Kault! Kault! Kault!’

‘Enough!’ snarled Glokta. His prisoner fell silent. The room was still.

Arch Lector Sult lifted his arm and pointed towards the three prisoners. ‘There is your proof, my Lords!’

‘This is a sham!’ bellowed Lord Brock, leaping to his feet. ‘This is an insult!’

Few voices joined him in support however, and those that did were half-hearted. Lord Heugen was notable for his careful silence, keenly studying the fine leather of his shoes. Barezin had shrunk back into his seat, looking half the size he had been a minute before. Lord Isher was staring off at the wall, fingering his heavy, golden chain, looking bored, as though the fate of the Guild of Mercers was of interest to him no longer.

Brock appealed to the High Justice himself, motionless in his tall chair at the high table. 'Lord Marovia, I beg of you! You are a reasonable man! Do not allow this . . . travesty!'

The hall fell silent, waiting for the old man's reply. He frowned and stroked his long beard. He glanced across at the grinning Arch Lector. He cleared his throat. 'I feel your pain, Lord Brock, indeed I do, but it seems that this is not a day for reasonable men. The Closed Council has examined the case and is well satisfied. My hands are tied.'

Brock worked his mouth, tasting defeat. 'This is not justice!' he shouted, turning round to address his peers. 'These men have plainly been tortured!'

Arch Lector Sult's mouth twisted with scorn. 'How would you have us deal with traitors and criminals?' he cried in a piercing voice. 'Would you raise a shield, Lord Brock, for the disloyal to hide behind?' He thumped the table, as if it too might be guilty of high treason. 'I for one will not see our great nation handed over to its enemies! Neither enemies without, nor enemies within!'

'Down with the Mercers!' came a cry from the public balcony.

'Hard justice for traitors!'

'The King's Justice!' bellowed a fat man near the back. There was a surge of anger and agreement from the floor, and calls for harsh measures and stiff penalties.

Brock looked round for his allies on the front row, but found none. He bunched his fists. 'This is no justice!' he shouted, pointing at the three prisoners. 'This is no proof!'

'His Majesty disagrees!' bellowed Hoff, 'and does not require your permission!' He held up a large document. 'The Guild of Mercers is hereby dissolved! Their licence revoked by Royal decree! His Majesty's Commission for Trade and Commerce will, over the coming months, review applications for trade rights with the city of Westport. Until such time as suitable candidates are found, the routes will be managed by capable, *loyal*, hands. The hands of His Majesty's Inquisition.'

Arch Lector Sult humbly inclined his head, oblivious to the furious cries from representatives and public gallery alike.

'Inquisitor Glokta!' continued the Lord Chamberlain, 'the Open Council thanks you for your diligence, and asks that you perform one more service in this matter.' Hoff held out a smaller paper. 'This is a warrant for the arrest of Magister Kault, bearing the King's own signature. We would ask that you serve it forthwith.' Glokta bowed stiffly and took the paper from the Lord Chamberlain's outstretched hand. 'You,' said Hoff, turning his eye on Jalenhorm.

'Lieutenant Jalenhorm, my Lord!' shouted the big man, stepping smartly forward.

'Whatever,' snapped Hoff impatiently, 'take twenty of the King's Own and

escort Inquisitor Glokta to the Mercers' Guildhall. Ensure that nothing and no one leaves the building without his orders!

'At once, my Lord!' Jalenhorm crossed the floor and ran up the aisle toward the exit, holding the hilt of his sword in one hand to stop it knocking against his leg. Glokta limped after him, cane tapping on the steps, the warrant for the arrest of Magister Kault crumpled in his tightly clenched fist. The monstrous albino had pulled the prisoners to their feet meanwhile, and was leading them, rattling and lolling, off towards the door by which they had entered.

'Lord Chamberlain!' shouted Brock, with one last effort. Jezal wondered how much money he must have made from the Mercers. How much he had hoped still to make. A very great deal, evidently.

But Hoff was unmoved. 'That concludes our business for today, my Lords!' Marovia was on his feet before the Lord Chamberlain had finished speaking, evidently keen to be away. The great ledgers were thumped shut. The fate of the honourable Guild of Mercers was sealed. Excited babbling filled the air once more, gradually rising in volume and soon joined by clattering and stamping as the representatives began to rise and leave the room. Arch Lector Sult remained seated, watching his beaten adversaries file reluctantly off the front row. Jezal met the desperate eyes of Salem Rews one last time as he was led towards the small door, then Practical Frost jerked at the chain and he was lost in the darkness beyond.

Outside, the square was even busier than before, the dense throng growing ever more excited as the news of the dissolution of the Guild of Mercers spread to those who had not been within. People stood, disbelieving, or hurried here and there: scared, surprised, confused. Jezal saw one man staring at him, staring at anyone, face pale, hands trembling. A Mercer perhaps, or a man in too deep with the Mercers, deep enough to be ruined along with them. There would be many such men.

Jezal felt a sudden tingling. Ardee West was leaning casually against the stones a little further on. They had not met in some time, not since that drunken outburst of hers, and he was surprised how pleased he was to see her. Probably she had been punished long enough, he told himself. Everyone deserved the chance to apologise. He hastened towards her with a broad smile on his lips. Then he noticed who she was with.

'That little bastard!' he muttered under his breath.

Lieutenant Brint was chatting freely in his cheap uniform, leaning closer to Ardee than Jezal thought was appropriate, underlining his tedious points with flamboyant gestures of his arms. She was nodding, smiling, then she tipped her head back and laughed, slapping the Lieutenant playfully on the chest. Brint laughed as well, the ugly little shit. They laughed together. For some reason Jezal felt a sharp pang of fury.

'Jezal, how are you!' shouted Brint, still giggling.

He stepped up close. 'That's Captain Luthar!' he spat, 'and how I am is none of your concern! Don't you have a job to do?'

Brint's mouth hung stupidly open for a moment, then his brows drew into a surly frown. 'Yes, sir,' he muttered, turning and stalking off. Jezal watched him go with a contempt even more intense than usual.

'Well that was charming,' said Ardee. 'Are those the manners you should use

before a lady?’

‘I really couldn’t say. Why? Was there one watching?’

He turned to look at her and caught, just for a moment, a self-satisfied smirk. Quite a nasty expression, as though she had enjoyed his outburst. He wondered for a silly instant whether she might have arranged the meeting, have placed herself and that idiot where Jezal would see them, hoping to arouse his jealousy . . . then she smiled at him, and laughed, and Jezal felt his anger fading. She looked very fine, he thought, tanned and vibrant in the sunlight, laughing out loud, not caring who heard. Very fine. Better than ever, in fact. A chance meeting was all, what else could it be? She fixed him with those dark eyes and his suspicions vanished. ‘Did you have to be so hard on him?’ she asked.

Jezal fixed his jaw. ‘Jumped-up, arrogant nobody, he’s probably nothing more than some rich man’s bastard. No blood, no money, no manners—’

‘More than me, of all three.’

Jezal cursed his big mouth. Rather than dragging an apology from her he was now in need of giving one himself. He sought desperately for some way out of this self-made trap. ‘Oh, but he’s an absolute moron!’ he whined.

‘Well,’ and Jezal was relieved to see one corner of Ardee’s mouth curl up in a sly smile, ‘he is at that. Shall we walk?’ She slipped her hand through his arm before he had the chance to answer, and started to lead him off towards the Kingsway. Jezal allowed himself to be guided between the frightened, the angry, the excited people.

‘So is it true?’ she asked.

‘Is what true?’

‘That the Mercers are finished?’

‘So it seems. Your old friend Sand dan Glokta was in the thick of it. He gave quite the performance, for a cripple.’

Ardee looked down at the floor. ‘You wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of him, crippled or no.’

‘No.’ Jezal’s mind went back to Salem Rew’s terrified eyes, staring desperately at him as he vanished into the darkness of the archway. ‘No, you wouldn’t.’

A silence descended on them as they strolled down the avenue, but it was a comfortable one. He liked walking with her. It no longer seemed important whether anyone apologised. Perhaps she had been right about the fencing anyway, just a little. Ardee seemed to read his thoughts. ‘How’s the swordplay going?’ she asked.

‘Not bad. How’s the drinking going?’

She raised a dark eyebrow. ‘Excellent well. If only there was a Contest for that every year, I’d soon come to the attention of the public.’ Jezal laughed, looking down at her as she walked beside him, and she smiled back. So clever, so sharp, so fearless. So damn fine looking. Jezal wondered if there had ever been a woman quite like her. If only she had the right blood, he thought to himself, and some money. A lot of money.

Means of Escape

‘Open the door, in the name of His Majesty!’ thundered Lieutenant Jalenhorm for the third time, hammering at the wood with his meaty fist. *The great oaf. Why do big men tend to have such little brains? Perhaps they get by on brawn too often, and their minds dry up like plums in the sun.*

The Mercers’ Guildhall was an impressive building in a busy square not far from the Agriont. A substantial crowd of onlookers had already gathered around Glokta and his armed escort: curious, fearful, fascinated, growing all the time. *They can smell blood, it seems.* Glokta’s leg was throbbing from the effort of hurrying down here, but he doubted that the Mercers would be taken entirely by surprise. He glanced round impatiently at the armoured guardsmen, at the masked Practicals, at the hard eyes of Frost, at the young officer beating on the door.

‘Open the—’

Enough of this foolishness. ‘I think they heard you, Lieutenant,’ said Glokta crisply, ‘but are choosing not to answer. Would you be so kind as to break the door down?’

‘What?’ Jalenhorm gawped at him, and then at the heavy double doors, firmly secured. ‘How will I—’

Practical Frost hurtled past. There was a deafening crack and a tearing of wood as he crashed into one of the doors with his burly shoulder, tearing it off its hinges and sending it crashing onto the floor of the room beyond.

‘Like so,’ muttered Glokta as he stepped through the archway, the splinters still settling. Jalenhorm followed him, looking dazed, a dozen armoured soldiers clattering behind.

An outraged clerk blocked the corridor beyond. ‘You can’t just – oof!’ he cried, as Frost flung him out of the way and his face crunched into the wall.

‘Arrest that man!’ shouted Glokta, waving his cane at the dumbstruck clerk. One of the soldiers grabbed him roughly with gauntleted fists and shoved him tumbling out into the daylight. Practicals began to pour through the broken doors, heavy sticks in their hands, eyes fierce above their masks. ‘Arrest everyone!’ shouted Glokta over his shoulder, limping down the corridor as fast as he could, following Frost’s broad back into the bowels of the building.

Through an open door Glokta saw a merchant in colourful robes, face covered with a sheen of sweat as he desperately heaped documents onto a blazing fire. ‘Seize him!’ screamed Glokta. A pair of Practicals leaped past into the room and began clubbing the man with their sticks. He fell with a cry, upsetting a table and kicking over a pile of ledgers. Loose papers and bits of burning ash fluttered through the air as the sticks rose and fell.

Glokta hurried on, crashes and cries spreading out into the building around him. The place was full of the smell of smoke, and sweat, and fear. *The doors are all guarded, but Kault might have a secret means of escape. He’s a slippery one.*

We must hope we are not too late. Curse this leg of mine! Not too late . . .

Glokta gasped and winced in pain, tottering as someone clutched at his coat. 'Help me!' shrieked the man, 'I am innocent!' Blood on a plump face. Fingers clutched at Glokta's clothes, threatening to drag him to the floor.

'Get him off me!' shouted Glokta, beating at him weakly with his cane, clawing at the wall in his efforts to stay upright. One of the Practicals leaped forward and clubbed the man across the back.

'I confess!' the merchant whimpered as the stick rose again, then it cracked down on his head. The Practical caught hold of his slumping body under the arms and dragged him back towards the door. Glokta hurried on, Lieutenant Jalenhorm wide-eyed at his shoulder. They reached a broad staircase, and Glokta eyed it with hatred. *My old enemies, always here ahead of me.* He laboured up as best he could, waving Practical Frost forward with his free hand. A baffled merchant was dragged past them and away, squawking something about his rights, heels kicking against the stairs.

Glokta slipped and nearly fell on his face, but someone caught him by the elbow and kept him upright. It was Jalenhorm, a look of confusion still splattered across his heavy, honest face. *So big men have their uses after all.* The young officer helped him up the rest of the steps. Glokta did not have the energy to refuse him. *Why bother? A man should know his limitations. There's nothing noble in falling on your face. I should know that.*

There was a large ante-chamber at the top of the stairs, richly decorated with a thick carpet and colourful hangings on the walls. Two guards stood before a large door with their swords drawn, dressed in the livery of the Guild of Mercers. Frost was facing them, hands rolled into white fists. Jalenhorm pulled out his own sword as he reached the landing, stepping forward to stand next to the albino. Glokta had to smile. *The tongueless torturer and the flower of chivalry. An unlikely alliance.*

'I have a warrant for Kault, signed by the King himself.' Glokta held out the paper so the guards could see it. 'The Mercers are finished. You have nothing to gain by getting in our way. Put up your swords! You have my word, you will not be harmed!'

The two guards glanced at each other uncertainly. 'Put them up!' shouted Jalenhorm, edging a little closer.

'Alright!' One of the men bent down and slid his sword along the boards. Frost caught it under one foot.

'And you!' shouted Glokta to the other one. 'Now!' The guard obeyed, throwing his sword to the floor and putting up his hands. A moment later Frost's fist crunched into the point of his jaw, knocking him cold and sending him crashing into the wall.

'But—' shouted the first guard. Frost grabbed him by the shirt and flung him down the stairs. He turned over and over, banging on the steps, flopping to the bottom, lying still. *I know what that feels like.*

Jalenhorm was standing motionless and blinking, his sword still raised. 'I thought you said—'

'Never mind about that. Frost, look for another way in.'

'Thhh.' The albino padded away down the corridor. Glokta gave him a moment, then he edged forward and tried the door. The handle turned, much

to his surprise, and the door swung open.

The room was opulence itself, near as big as a barn. The carving on the high ceiling was caked in gold leaf, the spines of the books on the shelves were studded with precious stones, the monstrous furniture was polished to a mirror shine. All was over-sized, over-embellished, over-expensive. *But who needs taste when you have money?* There were several big windows of the new design, large panes with little lead between them, offering a splendid view of the city, the bay, the ships within it. Magister Kault sat smiling at his vast gilt desk before the middle window in his fabulous robes of office, partly overshadowed by an enormous cabinet, the arms of the honourable Guild of Mercers etched into its doors.

Then he has not got away. I have him. I . . . Tied around the thick leg of the cabinet was a rope. Glokta followed it with his eyes as it snaked across the floor. The other end was tied around the Magister's neck. *Ah. So he does have a means of escape, after all.*

'Inquisitor Glokta!' Kault gave a squeaky, nervous laugh. 'What a pleasure to finally meet you! I've been hearing all about your investigations!' His fingers twitched at the knot on the rope, making sure it was tied securely.

'Is your collar too tight, Magister? Perhaps you should remove it?'

Another squeak of merriment. 'Oh, I don't think so! I don't intend to be answering any of your questions, thank you!' Out of the corner of his eye, Glokta saw a side door edging open. A big white hand appeared, fingers curling slowly round the door frame. *Frost. There is still hope of catching him, then. I must keep him talking.*

'There are no questions left to answer. We know it all.'

'Do you indeed?' giggled the Magister. The albino edged silently into the room, keeping to the shadows near the wall, hidden from Kault by the bulk of the cabinet.

'We know about Kalyne. About your little arrangement.'

'Imbecile! We had no arrangement! He was far too honourable to be bought! He would never take a mark from me!' *Then how . . .* Kault smiled a sick little smile. 'Sult's secretary,' he said, giggling again. 'Right under his nose, and yours too, cripple!' *Fool, fool – the secretary carried the messages, he saw the confession, he knew everything! I never trusted that smarmy shit. Kalyne was loyal, then.*

Glokta shrugged. 'We all make mistakes.'

The Magister gave a withering sneer. 'Mistakes? That's all you've made, dolt! The world is nothing like you think it is! You don't even know what side you're on! You don't even know what the sides are!'

'I am on the side of the King, and you are not. That is all I need to know.' Frost had made it to the cabinet and was pressed against it, pink eyes staring intently, trying to see round the corner without being seen. *Just a little longer, just a little further . . .*

'You know nothing, cripple! Some small business with tax, some petty bribery, that's all we were guilty of!'

'And the trifling matter of nine murders.'

'We had no choice!' screamed Kault. 'We never had any choices! We had to pay the bankers! They loaned us the money, and we had to pay! We've been

paying them for years! Valint and Balk, the bloodsuckers! We gave them everything, but they always wanted more!’

Valint and Balk? Bankers? Glokta threw an eye over the ridiculous opulence. ‘You seem to be keeping your head above water.’

‘Seem! Seem! All dust! All lies! The bankers own it all! They own us all! We owe them thousands! Millions!’ Kault giggled to himself. ‘But I don’t suppose they’ll ever get it now, will they?’

‘No. I don’t suppose they will.’

Kault leaned across the desk, the rope hanging down and brushing the leather top. ‘You want criminals, Glokta? You want traitors? Enemies of King and state? Look in the Closed Council. Look in the House of Questions. Look in the University. Look in the banks, Glokta!’ He saw Frost, edging round the cabinet no more than four strides away. His eyes went wide and he started up from his chair.

‘Get him!’ screamed Glokta. Frost sprang forward, lunged across the desk, caught hold of the flicking hem of Kault’s robe of office as the Magister span round and hurled himself at the window. *We have him!*

There was a sickening rip as the robe tore in Frost’s white fist. Kault seemed frozen in space for a moment as all that expensive glass shattered around him, shards and splinters glittering through the air, then he was gone. The rope snapped taut.

‘Thhhhh!’ hissed Frost, glaring at the broken window.

‘He jumped!’ gasped Jalenhorm, his mouth hanging open.

‘Clearly.’ Glokta limped over to the desk and took the ripped strip of cloth from Frost’s hands. Close up it scarcely seemed magnificent at all: brightly coloured but badly woven.

‘Who would have thought?’ muttered Glokta to himself. ‘Poor quality.’ He limped to the window and peered through the shattered hole. The head of the honourable Guild of Mercers was swinging slowly back and forth, twenty feet below, his torn, gold-embroidered gown flapping around him in the breeze. *Cheap clothes and expensive windows. If the cloth had been stronger we would have got him. If the window had more lead, we would have got him. Lives hinge on such chances.* Beneath him in the street a horrified crowd was already gathering: pointing, babbling, staring up at the hanging body. A woman screamed. *Fear, or excitement? They sound the same.*

‘Lieutenant, would you be so good as to go down and disperse that crowd? Then we can cut our friend loose and take him back with us.’ Jalenhorm looked at him blankly. ‘Dead or alive, the King’s warrant must be served.’

‘Yes, of course.’ The burly officer wiped sweat from his forehead and made, somewhat unsteadily, for the door.

Glokta turned back to the window and peered down at the slowly swinging corpse. Magister Kault’s last words echoed in his mind.

Look in the Closed Council. Look in the House of Questions. Look in the University. Look in the banks, Glokta!

Three Signs

West crashed onto his arse, one of his steels skittering out of his hands and across the cobbles. 'That's a touch!' shouted Marshal Varuz, 'A definite touch! Well fought, Jezal, well fought!'

West was starting to tire of losing. He was stronger than Jezal, and taller, with a better reach, but the cocky little bastard was quick. Damn quick, and getting quicker. He knew all of West's tricks now, more or less, and if he kept improving at this rate he'd soon be beating him every time. Jezal knew it too. He had a smile of infuriating smugness on his face as he offered his hand to West and helped him up from the ground.

'We're getting somewhere now!' Varuz slapped his stick against his leg in delight. 'We may even have ourselves a champion, eh, Major?'

'Very likely, sir,' said West, rubbing at his elbow, bruised and throbbing from his fall. He looked sidelong at Jezal, basking in the warmth of the Marshal's praise.

'But we must not grow complacent!'

'No, sir!' said Jezal emphatically.

'No indeed,' said Varuz, 'Major West is a capable fencer, of course, and you are privileged to have him as a partner but, well,' and he grinned at West, 'fencing is a young man's game, eh, Major?'

'Of course it is, sir,' muttered West. 'A young man's game.'

'Bremer dan Gorst, I expect, will be a different sort of opponent, as will the others at this year's Contest. Less of the veteran's cunning, perhaps, but more of the vigour of youth, eh West?' West, at thirty, was still feeling somewhat vigorous, but there was no purpose in arguing. He knew he'd never been the most gifted swordsman in the world. 'We have made great progress this past month, great progress. You have a chance, if you can maintain your focus. A definite chance! Well done! I will see you both tomorrow.' And the old Marshal strutted from the sunny courtyard.

West walked over to his fumbled steel, lying on the cobbles by the wall. His side was still aching from the fall, and he had to bend awkwardly to get it. 'I have to be going, myself,' he grunted as he straightened up, trying to hide his discomfort as best he could.

'Important business?'

'Marshal Burr has asked to see me.'

'Is it to be war then?'

'Perhaps. I don't know.' West looked Jezal up and down. He was avoiding West's eye for some reason. 'And you? What have you got in mind for today?'

Jezal fiddled with his steels. 'Er, nothing planned . . . not really.' He glanced up furtively. For such a good card player, the man was a useless liar.

West felt a niggling of worry. 'Ardee wouldn't be involved in your lack of plans would she?'

‘Erm ...’

The niggling became a cold throbbing. ‘Well?’

‘Maybe,’ snapped Jezal, ‘well . . . yes.’

West stepped right up to the younger man. ‘Jezal,’ he heard himself saying, slowly through gritted teeth, ‘I hope you’re not planning to fuck my sister.’

‘Now look here—’

The throbbing boiled over. West’s hands gripped hold of Jezal by his shoulders. ‘No, *you* look!’ he snarled. ‘I’ll not have her trifled with, you understand? She’s been hurt before, and I’ll not see her hurt any more! Not by you, not by anyone! I won’t stand for it! She’s not one of your games, you hear me?’

‘Alright,’ said Jezal, face suddenly pale. ‘Alright! I’ve no designs on her! We’re just friends is all. I like her! She doesn’t know anyone here and . . . you can trust me . . . there’s no harm in it! Ah! Get off me!’

West realised he was squeezing Jezal’s arms with all his strength. How had that happened? He’d only meant to have a quiet word, and now he’d gone way too far. Hurt before . . . damn it! He should never have said that! He let go suddenly, drew back, swallowing his fury. ‘I don’t want you seeing her any more, do you hear me?’

‘Now hold on West, who are you to—’

West’s anger began to pulse again. ‘Jezal,’ he growled, ‘I’m your friend, so I’m asking you.’ He stepped forward again, closer than ever. ‘And I’m her brother, so I’m warning you. Stay away! No good can come of it!’

Jezal shrank back against the wall. ‘Alright . . . alright! She’s your sister!’

West turned and stalked towards the archway, rubbing the back of his neck, his head thumping.

Lord Marshal Burr was sitting and staring out of the window when West arrived at his offices. A big, grim, beefy man with a thick brown beard and a simple uniform. West wondered how bad the news would be. If the Marshal’s face was anything to go by it was very bad indeed.

‘Major West,’ he said, glaring up from under his heavy brows. ‘Thank you for coming.’

‘Of course, sir.’ West noticed three roughly-made wooden boxes on a table by the wall. Burr saw him looking at them.

‘Gifts,’ he said sourly, ‘from our friend in the north, Bethod.’

‘Gifts?’

‘For the King, it seems.’ The Marshal scowled and sucked at his teeth. ‘Why don’t you have a look at what he sent us, Major?’

West walked over to the table, reached out and cautiously opened the lid of one of the boxes. An unpleasant smell flowed out, like well-rotted meat, but there was nothing inside but some brown dirt. He opened the next box. The smell was worse. More brown dirt, caked around the inside, and some hair, some strands of yellow hair. West swallowed, looked up at the frowning Lord Marshal. ‘Is this all, sir?’

Burr snorted. ‘If only. The rest we had to bury.’

‘Bury?’

The Marshal picked up a sheet of paper from his desk. ‘Captain Silber, Captain Hoss, Colonel Arinhorm. Those names mean anything to you?’

West felt sick. That smell. It reminded him of Gurkhul somehow, of the battlefield. 'Colonel Arinhorm, I know,' he mumbled, staring at the three boxes, 'by reputation. He's commander of the garrison at Dunbrec.'

'Was,' corrected Burr, 'and the other two commanded small outposts nearby, on the frontier.'

'The frontier?' mumbled West, but he already guessed what was coming.

'Their heads, Major. The Northmen sent us their heads.' West swallowed, looking at the yellow hairs stuck to the inside of the box. 'Three signs, they said, when it was time.' Burr got up from his chair and stood, looking out of the window. 'The outposts were nothing: wooden buildings mostly, a palisade wall, ditches and so on, lightly manned. Little strategic importance. Dunbrec is another matter.'

'It commands the fords on the Whiteflow,' said West numbly, 'the best way out of England.'

'Or in. A vital point. Considerable time and resources were spent on the defences there. The very latest designs were used, our finest architects. A garrison of three hundred men, with stores of weapons and food to stand a year of siege. It was considered impregnable, the lynchpin of our plans for the defence of the frontier.' Burr frowned, deep grooves appearing across the bridge of his nose. 'Gone.'

West's head had started hurting again. 'When, sir?'

'When is the question. It must have been at least two weeks ago, for these "gifts" to have reached us. I am being called defeatist,' said Burr sourly, 'but I guess that the Northmen are loose and that, by now, they have overrun half of northern England. A mining community or two, several penal colonies, nothing so far of major importance, no towns to speak of, but they are coming, West, and fast, you may be sure of that. You don't send heads to your enemy, then wait politely for a reply.'

'What is being done?'

'Precious little! England is in uproar, of course. Lord Governor Meed is raising every man, determined to march out and beat Bethod on his own, the idiot. Varying reports place the Northmen anywhere and everywhere, with a thousand men or a hundred thousand. The ports are choked with civilians desperate to escape, rumours are rife of spies and murderers loose in the country, and mobs seek out citizens with Northern blood and beat them, rob them, or worse. Put simply, it is chaos. Meanwhile we sit here on our fat arses, waiting.'

'But . . . weren't we warned? Didn't we know?'

'Of course!' Burr threw his broad hand up in the air, 'but no one took it very seriously, would you believe! Damn painted savage stabs himself on the floor of the Open Council, challenges us before the King, and nothing is done! Government by committee! Everyone pulling their own way! You can only react, never prepare!' The Marshal coughed and burped, spat on the floor. 'Gah! Damn it! Damn indigestion!' He sat back in his chair, rubbing his stomach unhappily.

West hardly knew what to say. 'How do we proceed?' he mumbled.

'We've been ordered north immediately, meaning as soon as anyone can be bothered to supply me with men and arms. The King, meaning that drunkard

Hoff, has commanded me to bring these Northmen to heel. Twelve regiments of the King's Own – seven of foot and five of horse, to be fleshed out with levies from the aristocracy, and whatever the Anglanders haven't squandered before we get there.'

West shifted uncomfortably in his chair. 'That should be an overwhelming force.'

'Huh,' grunted the Marshal. 'It better be. It's everything we have, more or less, and that worries me.' West frowned. 'Dagoska, Major. We cannot fight the Gurkish and the Northmen both at once.'

'But surely, sir, the Gurkish, they wouldn't risk another war so soon? I thought it was all idle talk?'

'I hope so, I hope so.' Burr pushed some papers absently around his desk. 'But this new Emperor, Uthman, is not what we were expecting. He was the youngest son, but when he heard of his father's death . . . he had all his brothers strangled. Strangled them himself, some say. Uthman-ul-Dosht, they are calling him. Uthman the Merciless. He has already declared his intention to recapture Dagoska. Empty talk, perhaps. Perhaps not.' Burr pursed his lips. 'They say he has spies everywhere. He might even now be learning of our troubles in Angland, might even now be preparing to take advantage of our weakness. We must be done quickly with these Northmen. Very quickly. Twelve regiments and levies from the noblemen. And from that point of view it could not be a worse time.'

'Sir?'

'This business with the Mercers. A bad business. Some of the big noblemen got stung. Brock, Isher, Barezin, and others. Now they're dragging their feet with the levies. Who knows what they'll send us, or when? Bunch of half-starved, unarmed beggars probably, an excuse to clean the scrapings from their land. A useless crowd of extra mouths to feed, and clothe, and arm, and we are desperately short of good officers.'

'I have some good men in my battalion.'

Burr twitched impatiently. 'Good men, yes! Honest men, enthusiastic men, but not experienced! Most of those who fought in the South did not enjoy it. They have left the army, and have no intention of returning. Have you seen how young the officers are these days? We're a damn finishing school! And now His Highness the Prince has expressed his interest in a command. He doesn't even know which end of a sword to hold, but he is set on glory and I cannot refuse him!'

'Prince Raynault?'

'If only!' shouted Burr. 'Raynault might actually be of some use! It's Ladisla I'm talking of! Commanding a division! A man who spends a thousand marks a month on clothes! His lack of discipline is notorious! I've heard it said that he's forced himself on more than one servant in the palace, but that the Arch Lector was able to silence the girls.'

'Surely not,' said West, although he had actually heard such a rumour himself.

'The heir to the throne, in harm's way, when the King is in poor health? A ludicrous notion!' Burr got up, burping and wincing. 'Damn this stomach!' He stalked over to the window and frowned out across the Agriont.

'They think it will be easily settled,' he said quietly. 'The Closed Council. A little jaunt in Angland, done with before the first snow falls. In spite of this shock with Dunbrec. They never learn. They said the same about our war with the Gurkish, and that nearly finished us. These Northmen are not the primitives they think. I fought with Northern mercenaries in Starikland: hard men used to hard lives, raised on warfare, fearless and stubborn, expert at fighting in the hills, in the forests, in the cold. They do not follow our rules, or even understand them. They will bring a violence and a savagery to the battlefield that would make the Gurkish blush.' Burr turned away from the window, back to West. 'You were born in Angland, weren't you, Major?'

'Yes, sir, in the south, near Ostenhorm. My family's farm was there, before my father died . . .' He trailed off.

'You were raised there?'

'Yes.'

'You know the land then?'

West frowned. 'In that region, sir, but I have not been back for—'

'Do you know these Northmen?'

'Some. There are still many living in Angland.'

'You speak their tongue?'

'Yes, a little, but they speak many—'

'Good. I am putting together a staff, good men I can rely on to carry out my orders, and see to it that this army of ours does not fall apart before it even comes into contact with the enemy.'

'Of course, sir.' West racked his brains. 'Captain Luthar is a capable and intelligent officer, Lieutenant Jalenhorm—'

'Bah!' shouted Burr, waving his hand in frustration, 'I know Luthar, the boy's a cretin! Just the sort of bright-eyed child that I was talking about! It's you I need, West.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you! Marshal Varuz, the Union's most famous soldier no less, has given you a glowing report. He says you are a most committed, tenacious, and hard-working officer. The very qualities I need! As a Lieutenant you fought in Gurkhul under Colonel Glokta, did you not?'

West swallowed. 'Well, yes.'

'And it is well known you were first through the breach at Ulrioch.'

'Well, among the first, I was—'

'You have led men in the field, and your personal courage is beyond question! There is no need to be modest, Major, you are the man for me!' Burr sat back, a smile on his face, confident he had made his point. He burped again, holding up his hand. 'My apologies . . . damn indigestion!'

'Sir, may I be blunt?'

'I am no courtier, West. You must always be blunt with me. I demand it!'

'An appointment on a Lord Marshal's staff, sir, you must understand. I am a gentleman's son. A commoner. As commander of a battalion, I already have difficulty gaining the respect of the junior officers. The men I would have to give orders to if I were on your staff, sir, senior men with good blood . . .' He paused, exasperated. The Marshal gazed blankly at him. 'They will not permit it!'

Burr's eyebrows drew together. 'Permit it?'

'Their pride will not allow it, sir, their—'

'Damn their pride!' Burr leaned forward, his dark eyes fixed on West's face. 'Now listen to me, and listen carefully. Times are changing. I don't need men with good blood. I need men who can plan, and organise, give orders, and follow them. There will be no room in my army for those who cannot do as they are told, I don't care how noble they are. As a member of my staff you represent me, and I will not be slighted or ignored.' He burped suddenly, and smashed the table with his fist. 'I will see to it!' he roared. 'Times are changing! They may not smell it yet, but they soon will!'

West stared dumbly back. 'In any case,' and Burr waved a dismissive hand, 'I am not consulting with you, I am informing you. This is your new assignment. Your King needs you, your country needs you, and that is all. You have five days to hand over command of your battalion.' And the Lord Marshal turned back to his papers.

'Yes, sir,' muttered West.

He fumbled the door shut behind him with numb fingers, walked slowly down the hallway, staring at the floor. War. War in the North. Dunbrec fallen, the Northmen loose in Angland. Officers hurried around him. Someone brushed past, but he hardly noticed. There were people in danger, mortal danger! People he knew maybe, neighbours from home. There was fighting even now, inside the Union's borders! He rubbed his jaw. This war could be a terrible thing. Worse than Gurkhul had been, even, and he would be at the heart of it. A place on a Lord Marshal's staff. Him? Collem West? A commoner? He still could hardly believe it.

West felt a sneaking, guilty glow of satisfaction. It was for just such an appointment that he had been working like a dog all these years. If he did well there was no telling where he might go. This war was a bad thing, a terrible thing, no doubt. He felt himself grinning. A terrible thing. But it just might be the making of him.

The Theatrical Outfitter's

The deck creaked and shifted beneath his feet, the sail-cloth flapped gently, sea birds crowed and called in the salty air above.

'I never thought to see such a thing,' muttered Logen.

The city was a huge white crescent, stretching all round the wide blue bay, sprawling across many bridges, tiny in the distance, and onto rocky islands in the sea. Here and there green parks stood out from the confusion of buildings, the thin grey lines of rivers and canals shone in the sun. There were walls too, studded with towers, skirting the distant edge of the city and striking boldly through the jumble of houses. Logen's jaw hung stupidly open, his eyes darted here and there, unable to take in the whole.

'Adua,' murmured Bayaz. 'The centre of the world. The poets call her the city of white towers. Beautiful, isn't she, from a distance?' The Magus leaned towards him. 'Believe me, though, she stinks when you get close.'

A vast fortress rose up from within the city, its sheer white walls towering above the carpet of buildings outside, bright sunlight glinting on shining domes within. Logen had never dreamed of a man-made thing so great, so proud, so strong. One tower in particular rose high, high over all the others, a tapering cluster of smooth, dark pillars, seeming to support the very sky.

'And Bethod means to make war on this?' he whispered. 'He must be mad.'

'Perhaps. Bethod, for all his waste and pride, understands the Union.' Bayaz nodded towards the city. 'They are jealous of one another, all those people. It may be a union in name, but they fight each other tooth and nail. The lowly squabble over trifles. The great wage secret wars for power and wealth, and they call it government. Wars of words, and tricks, and guile, but no less bloody for that. The casualties are many.' The Magus sighed. 'Behind those walls they shout and argue and endlessly bite one another's backs. Old squabbles are never settled, but thrive, and put down roots, and the roots grow deeper with the passing years. It has always been so. They are not like you, Logen. A man here can smile, and fawn, and call you friend, give you gifts with one hand and stab you with the other. You will find this a strange place.'

Logen already found it the strangest thing he had ever seen. There was no end to it. As their boat slipped into the bay the city seemed to grow more vast than ever. A forest of white buildings, speckled with dark windows, embracing them on all sides, covering the hills in roofs and towers, crowding together, wall squashed to wall, pressing up against the water on the shoreline.

Ships and boats of all designs vied with each other in the bay, sails billowing, crewmen crying out over the noise of the spray, hurrying about the decks and crawling through the rigging. Some were smaller even than their own little two-sailed boat. Some were far larger. Logen gawped, amazed, as a huge vessel ploughed through the water towards them, shining spray flying

from its prow. A mountain of wood, floating by some magic in the sea. The ship passed, leaving them rocking in its wake, but there were more, many more, tethered to the countless wharves along the shore.

Logen, shielding his eyes against the bright sun with one hand, began to make out people on the sprawling docks. He began to hear them too, a faint din of voices crying and carts rattling and cargoes clattering to the ground. There were hundreds of tiny figures, swarming among the ships and buildings like black ants. 'How many live here?' he whispered.

'Thousands.' Bayaz shrugged. 'Hundreds of thousands. People from every land within the Circle of the World. There are Northmen here, and dark-skinned Kantics from Gurkhul and beyond. People from the Old Empire, far to the west, and merchants of the Free Cities of Styria. Others too, from still further away – the Thousand Islands, distant Suljuk, and Thond, where they worship the sun. More people than can be counted – living, dying, working, breeding, climbing one upon the other. Welcome,' and Bayaz spread his arms wide to encompass the monstrous, the beautiful, the endless city, 'to civilisation!'

Hundreds of thousands. Logen struggled to understand it. Hundreds . . . of thousands. Could there be so many people in the world? He stared at the city, all around him, wondering, rubbing his aching eyes. What might a hundred thousand people look like?

An hour later he knew.

Only in battle had Logen ever been so squashed, hemmed, pressed by other people. It was like a battle, here on the docks – the cries, the anger, the crush, the fear and confusion. A battle in which no mercy was shown, and which had no end and no winners. Logen was used to the open sky, the air around him, his own company. On the road, when Bayaz and Quai had ridden close beside him, he'd felt squeezed. Now there were people on every side, pushing, jostling, shouting. Hundreds of them! Thousands! Hundreds of thousands! Could they really all be people? People like him with thoughts and moods and dreams? Faces loomed up and flashed by – surly, anxious, frowning, gone in a sickening whirl of colour. Logen swallowed, blinked. His throat was painfully dry. His head span. Surely this was hell. He knew he deserved to be here, but he didn't remember dying.

'Malacus!' he hissed desperately. The apprentice looked round. 'Stop a moment!' Logen pulled at his collar, trying to let some air in. 'I can't breathe!'

Quai grinned. 'It might just be the smell.'

It might at that. The docks smelled like hell, and no mistake. The reek of stinking fish, sickly spices, rotting fruit, fresh dung, sweating horses and mules and people, mingled and bred under the hot sun and became worse by far than any one alone.

'Move!' A shoulder knocked Logen roughly aside and was gone. He leaned against a grimy wall and wiped sweat from his face.

Bayaz was smiling. 'Not like the wide and barren North, eh, Ninefingers?'

'No.' Logen watched the people milling past – the horses, the carts, the endless faces. A man stared suspiciously at him as he passed. A boy pointed at him and shouted something. A woman with a basket gave him a wide berth, staring fearfully up as she hurried by. Now he had a moment to think, they

were all looking, and pointing, and staring, and they didn't look happy.

Logen leaned down to Malacus. 'I am feared and hated throughout the North. I don't like it, but I know why.' A sullen group of sailors stared at him with hard eyes, muttering to each other under their breath. He watched them, puzzled, until they disappeared behind a rumbling wagon. 'Why do they hate me here?'

'Bethod has moved quickly,' muttered Bayaz, frowning out at the crowds. 'His war with the Union has already begun. We will not find the North too popular in Adua, I fear.'

'How do they know where I'm from?'

Malacus raised an eyebrow. 'You stick out somewhat.'

Logen flinched as a pair of laughing youths flashed by him. 'I do? Among all this?'

'Only like a huge, scarred, dirty gatepost.'

'Ah.' He looked down at himself. 'I see.'

Away from the docks the crowds grew sparser, the air cleaner, the noise faded. It was still teeming, stinking, and noisy, but at least Logen could take a breath.

They passed across wide paved squares, decorated with plants and statues, where brightly-painted wooden signs hung over doors – blue fish, pink pigs, purple bunches of grapes, brown loaves of bread. There were tables and chairs out in the sun where people sat and ate from flat pots, drank from green glass cups. They threaded through narrow alleys, where rickety-looking wood and plaster buildings leaned out over them, almost meeting above their heads, leaving only a thin strip of blue sky between. They wandered down wide, cobbled roads, busy with people and lined with monstrous white buildings. Logen blinked and gaped at all of it.

On no moor, however foggy, in no forest, however dense, had Logen ever felt so completely lost. He had no idea now in what direction the boat was, though they'd left it no more than half an hour ago. The sun was hidden behind the towering buildings and everything looked the same. He was terrified he'd lose track of Bayaz and Quai in the crowds, and be lost forever. He hurried after the back of the wizard's bald head, following him into an open space. A great road, bigger than any they'd seen so far, bounded on either side by white palaces behind high walls and fences, lined with ancient trees.

The people here were different. Their clothes were bright and gaudy, cut in strange styles that served no purpose. The women hardly seemed like people at all – pale and bony, swaddled in shining fabric, flapping at themselves in the hot sun with pieces of cloth stretched over sticks.

'Where are we?' he shouted at Bayaz. If the wizard had answered that they were on the moon, Logen would not have been surprised.

'This is the Middleway, one of the city's main thoroughfares! It cuts through the very centre of the city to the Agriont!'

'Agriont?'

'Fortress, palace, barracks, seat of government. A city within the city. The heart of the Union. That's where we're going.'

'We are?' A group of sour young men stared suspiciously at Logen as he passed them. 'Will they let us in?'

‘Oh yes. But they won’t like it.’

Logen struggled on through the crowds. Everywhere the sun twinkled on the panes of glass windows, hundreds of them. Carleon had a few glass windows in the grandest buildings, at least before they’d sacked the city. Precious few afterwards, it had to be admitted. Precious little of anything. The Dogman had loved the sound the glass made as it broke. He’d prodded at the windows with a spear, a great big smile on his face, delighted by the crash and tinkle.

That had hardly been the worst of it. Bethod had given the city to his Carls for three days. That was his custom, and they loved him for it. Logen had lost his finger in the battle the day before, and they’d closed the wound with hot iron. It throbbed, and throbbed, and the pain had made him savage. As though he’d needed an excuse for violence back then. He remembered the stink of blood, and sweat, and smoke. The sounds of screaming, and crashing, and laughter.

‘Please . . .’ Logen tripped, nearly fell. There was something clinging to his leg. A woman, sitting on the ground beside a wall. Her clothes were dirty, ragged, her face was pale, pinched with hunger. She had something in her arms. A bundle of rags. A child. ‘Please . . .’ Nothing else. The people laughed and chattered and surged around them, just as if they weren’t there. ‘Please ...’

‘I don’t have anything,’ he muttered. No more than five strides away a man in a tall hat sat at a table and chuckled with a friend as he tucked into a steaming plate of meat and vegetables. Logen blinked at the plate of food, at the starving woman.

‘Logen! Come on!’ Bayaz had taken him by the elbow and was drawing him away.

‘But shouldn’t we—’

‘Haven’t you noticed? They’re everywhere! The King needs money, so he squeezes the nobles. The nobles squeeze their tenants, the tenants squeeze the peasants. Some of them, the old, the weak, the extra sons and daughters, they get squeezed right out the bottom. Too many mouths to feed. The lucky ones make thieves or whores, the rest end up begging.’

‘But—’

‘Clear the road!’ Logen stumbled to the wall and pressed himself against it, Malacus and Bayaz beside him. The crowds parted and a long column of men tramped by, shepherded by armoured guards. Some were young, mere boys, some were very old. All were dirty and ragged, and few of them looked healthy. A couple were clearly lame, hobbling along as best they could. One near the front had only one arm. A passer-by in a fabulous crimson jacket held a square of cloth over his wrinkled nose as the beggars shuffled past.

‘What are these?’ Logen whispered to Bayaz. ‘Law-breakers?’

The Magus chuckled. ‘Soldiers.’

Logen stared at them – filthy, coughing, limping, some without boots. ‘Soldiers? These?’

‘Oh yes. They go to fight Bethod.’

Logen rubbed at his temples. ‘A clan once sent their poorest warrior, a man called Forley the Weakest, to fight me in a duel. They meant it by way of surrender. Why does this Union send their weakest?’ Logen shook his head grimly. ‘They won’t beat Bethod with such as these.’

‘They will send others.’ Bayaz pointed out another, smaller gathering. ‘Those are soldiers too.’

‘Those?’ A group of tall youths, dressed in gaudy suits of red or bright green cloth, a couple with outsize hats. They were at least wearing swords, of a kind, but they hardly looked like fighting men. Fighting women, maybe. Logen frowned, staring from one group to the other. The dirty beggars, the gaudy lads. It was hard for him to say which were the stranger.



A tiny bell jingled as the door opened, and Logen followed Bayaz through the low archway, Malacus behind him. The shop was dim after the bright street and it took Logen’s eyes a moment to adjust. Leaning against a wall were sheets of wood, childishly daubed with pictures of buildings, forests, mountains. Strange clothes were draped over stands beside them – flowing robes, lurid gowns, suits of armour, enormous hats and helmets, rings and jewellery, even a heavy crown. Weapons occupied a small rack, swords and spears richly decorated. Logen stepped closer, frowning. They were fakes. Nothing was real. The weapons were painted wood, the crown was made of flaking tin, the jewels were coloured glass.

‘What is this place?’

Bayaz was casting an eye over the robes by the wall. ‘A theatrical outfitter’s.’

‘A what?’

‘The people of this city love spectacle. Comedy, drama, theatre of all kinds. This shop provides equipment for the mounting of plays.’

‘Stories?’ Logen poked at a wooden sword. ‘Some people have too much time on their hands.’

A small, plump man emerged from a door at the back of the shop, looking Bayaz, Malacus and Logen over suspiciously. ‘Can I help you, gentlemen?’

‘Of course.’ Bayaz stepped forward, switching effortlessly to the common tongue. ‘We are mounting a production, and require some costumes. We understand you are the foremost theatrical outfitter’s in all of Adua.’

The shopkeeper smiled nervously, taking in their grimy faces and travel stained clothes. ‘True, true, but . . . er . . . quality is expensive, gentlemen.’

‘Money is no object.’ Bayaz took out a bulging purse and tossed it absently on the counter. It sagged open, heavy golden coins scattering across the wood.

The shopkeeper’s eyes lit with an inner fire. ‘Of course! What precisely did you have in mind?’

‘I need a magnificent robe, suitable for a Magus, or a great sorcerer, or some such. Something of the arcane about it, certainly. Then we’ll have something similar, if less impressive, for an apprentice. Finally we need something for a mighty warrior, a prince of the distant North. Something with fur, I imagine.’

‘Those should be straightforward. I will see what we have.’ The shopkeeper disappeared through the door behind the counter.

‘What is all this shit?’ asked Logen.

The wizard grinned. ‘People are born to their station here. They have

commoners, to fight, and farm the land, and do the work. They have gentry, to trade, and build and do the thinking. They have nobility, to own the land and push the others around. They have royalty . . .’ Bayaz glanced at the tin crown ‘. . . I forget exactly why. In the North you can rise as high as your merits will take you. Only look at our mutual friend, Bethod. Not so here. A man is born in his place and is expected to stay there. We must seem to be from a high place indeed, if we are to be taken seriously. Dressed as we are we wouldn’t get past the gates of the Agriont.’

The shopkeeper interrupted him by reappearing through the door, his arms heaped with bright cloth. ‘One mystical robe, suitable for the most powerful of wizards! Used last year for a Juvenis in a production of *The End of the Empire*, during the spring festival. It is, if I may say so, some of my best work.’ Bayaz held the shimmering swathe of crimson cloth up to the faint light, gazing at it admiringly. Arcane diagrams, mystical lettering, and symbols of sun, moon and stars, glittered in silver thread.

Malacus ran a hand over the shining cloth of his own absurd garment. ‘I don’t think you’d have laughed me off so quickly, eh, Logen, if I’d arrived at your campfire dressed in this?’

Logen winced. ‘I reckon I might’ve.’

‘And here we have a splendid piece of barbarian garb.’ The shopkeeper hefted a black leather tunic onto the counter, set with swirls of shiny brass, trimmed with pointless tissues of delicate chain-mail. He pointed at the matching fur cloak. ‘This is real sable!’ It was a ludicrous piece of clothing, equally useless for warmth or protection.

Logen folded his arms across his old coat. ‘You think I’m going to wear that?’

The shopkeeper swallowed nervously. ‘You must forgive my friend,’ said Bayaz. ‘He is an actor after the new fashion. He believes in losing himself entirely in his role.’

‘Is that so?’ squeaked the man, looking Logen up and down. ‘Northmen are . . . I suppose . . . topical.’

‘Absolutely. I do declare, Master Ninefingers is the very best at what he does.’ The old wizard nudged Logen in the ribs. ‘The very best. I have seen it.’

‘If you say so.’ The shopkeeper looked far from convinced. ‘Might I enquire what you will be staging?’

‘Oh, it’s a new piece.’ Bayaz tapped the side of his bald head with a finger. ‘I am still working on the details.’

‘Really?’

‘Indeed. More a scene than an entire play.’ He glanced back at the robe, admiring the way the light glittered on the arcane symbols. ‘A scene in which Bayaz, the First of the Magi, finally takes up his seat on the Closed Council.’

‘Ah,’ the shopkeeper nodded knowingly. ‘A political piece. A biting satire, perhaps? Will it be comic, or dramatic in tone?’

Bayaz glanced sidelong at Logen. ‘That remains to be seen.’

Barbarians at the Gate

Jezal flashed along the lane beside the moat, feet pounding on the worn cobblestones, the great white wall sliding endlessly by on his right, one tower after another, as he made his daily circuit of the Agriont. Since he had cut down on the drinking the improvement in his stamina had been impressive. He was scarcely even out of breath. It was early and the streets of the city were nearly empty. The odd person would look up at him as he ran by, maybe even call out some word of encouragement, but Jezal barely noticed them. His eyes were fixed on the sparkling, lapping water in the moat, and his mind was elsewhere.

Ardee. Where else was it ever? He had supposed, after that day when West had warned him off, after he had stopped seeing her, that his thoughts would soon return to other matters, and other women. He had applied himself to his fencing with a will, attempted to show an interest in his duties as an officer, but he found himself unable to concentrate, and other women seemed now pale, flat, tedious creatures. The long runs, the monotonous exercises with bar and beam, gave his mind ample opportunity to wander. The tedium of peacetime soldiering was even worse: reading boring papers, standing guard on things that needed no guarding. His attention would inevitably slip, and then she would be there.

Ardee in wholesome peasant garb, flushed and sweaty from hard work in the fields. Ardee in the finery of a princess, glittering with jewels. Ardee bathing in forest pools, while he watched from the bushes. Ardee proper and demure, glancing shyly up at him from beneath her lashes. Ardee a whore by the docks, beckoning to him from a grimy doorway. The fantasies were infinite in variety, but they all ended the same way.

His hour-long circuit of the Agriont was complete and he thumped across the bridge and back in through the south gate.

Jezal treated the guards to their daily share of indifference, trotted through the tunnel and up the long ramp into the fortress, then turned towards the courtyard where Marshal Varuz would be waiting. All the while, Ardee was rubbing up against the back of his mind.

It was hardly as though he had nothing else to think about. The Contest was close now, very close. Soon he would fight before the cheering crowds, his family and friends among them. It might make his reputation . . . or sink it. He should have been lying awake at night, tense and sweating, worrying endlessly about forms, and training, and steels. And yet somehow that wasn't what he thought about in bed.

Then there was a war on. It was easy to forget, here in the sunny lanes of the Agriont, that Angland had been invaded by hordes of slaving barbarians. He would be going north soon, to lead his company in battle. There, surely, was a thought to keep a man occupied. Was not war a deadly business? He

could be hurt, or scarred, or killed even. Jezal tried to conjure up the twisting, twitching, painted face of Fenris the Feared. Legions of screaming savages descending upon the Agriont. It was a terrible business alright, a dangerous and frightening business.

Hmmm.

Ardee came from Angland. What if, say, she were to fall into the hands of the Northmen? Jezal would rush to her rescue, of course. She would not be hurt. Well, not badly. Perhaps her clothes a little torn, like so? No doubt she would be frightened, grateful. He would be obliged to comfort her, of course. She might even faint? He might have to carry her, her head pressed against his shoulder. He might have to lay her down and loosen her clothes. Their lips might touch, just brush gently, hers might part a little, then . . .

Jezal stumbled in the road. There was a pleasant swelling building in his crotch. Pleasant, but hardly compatible with a brisk run. He was nearly at the courtyard now, and this would never do at fencing practice. He glanced desperately around for a distraction, and nearly choked on his tongue. Major West was standing by the wall, dressed to fence and watching him approach with an unusually grim expression. For an instant, Jezal wondered if his friend might be able to tell what he had been thinking. He swallowed guiltily, felt the blood rushing to his face. West couldn't know, he couldn't. But he was most unhappy about something.

'Luthar,' he grunted.

'West.' Jezal stared down at his shoes. They had not been getting on too well since West joined Lord Marshal Burr's staff. Jezal tried to be happy for him, but could not escape the feeling that he was better qualified for the post. He had excellent blood after all, whether he had experience in the field or not. Then Ardee was still lurking between them, that unpleasant and needless warning. Everyone knew that West had been first through the breach at Ulrioch. Everyone knew that he had the devil of a temper. That had always seemed exciting to Jezal, until he got on the wrong end of it.

'Varuz is waiting.' West unfolded his arms and strode off towards the archway, 'and he's not alone.'

'Not alone?'

'The Marshal feels you need to get used to an audience.'

Jezal frowned. 'I'm surprised anyone cares in the present climate, what with the war and all.'

'You'd be surprised. Fighting and fencing and all things martial are very much the flavour. Everyone's wearing a sword these days, even if they've never drawn one in their lives. There's an absolute fever about the Contest, believe me.'

Jezal blinked as they passed into the bright courtyard. A stand of temporary seating had been hastily erected along one wall, packed from one end to the other with people, three score or more.

'And here he is!' shouted Marshal Varuz. There was a ripple of polite applause. Jezal felt himself grinning – there were some very important people in amongst the crowd. He spotted Marovia, the Lord High Justice, stroking his long beard. Lord Isher was not far away from him, looking slightly bored. Crown Prince Ladisla himself was lounging on the front row, shining in a shirt

of gossamer chain-mail and clapping enthusiastically. The people on the benches behind had to lean over to see round the waving plume on his magnificent hat.

Varuz handed Jezal his steels, still beaming. 'Don't you dare make me look a fool!' he hissed. Jezal coughed nervously, looking up at the rows of expectant people. His heart sank. Inquisitor Glokta's toothless grin leered at him from the crowd, and on the row behind him . . . Ardee West. She was wearing an expression that she never had in his daydreams: one third sullen, one third accusing, one third simply bored. He glanced away, staring toward the opposite wall, inwardly cursing his own cowardice. He seemed unable to meet anyone's eye these days.

'This bout will be fought with half-edged steels!' thundered the Lord Marshal. 'The best of three touches!' West already had his swords drawn and was making his way to the circle, marked out with white chalk in the carefully shaved grass. Jezal's heart was hammering loud as he fumbled his own steels out of their sheaths, acutely aware of all those eyes upon him. He took his mark opposite West, pushing his feet cautiously into the grass. West raised his steels, Jezal did the same. They faced each other for a moment, motionless.

'Begin!' shouted Varuz.

It quickly became clear that West had no mind to roll over for him. He came on with more than his usual ferocity, harrying Jezal with a flurry of heavy cuts, their steels clashing and scraping rapidly together. He gave ground, still uncomfortable under the watchful eyes of all those people, damned important people some of them, but as West pushed him back towards the edge of the circle, his nerves began to fade, his training took over. He ducked away, making room for himself, parrying the cuts with left and right, dodging and dancing, too fast to catch.

The people faded, even Ardee was gone. The blades moved by themselves, back and forth, up and down. There was no need for him to look at them. He turned his attention to West's eyes, watched them flicker from the ground to the steels to Jezal's dancing feet, trying to guess his intentions.

He felt the lunge coming even before it was begun. He feinted one way then turned the other, slipping smoothly round behind West as he blundered past. It was a simple matter for him to apply his foot to the seat of his opponent's trousers and shove him out of the circle.

'A touch!' shouted Marshal Varuz.

There was a ripple of laughter as the Major sprawled on his face. 'A touch on the arse!' guffawed the Crown Prince, his plume waving back and forth with merriment. 'One to Captain Luthar!' West didn't look half so intimidating with his face in the dirt. Jezal gave a little bow to the audience, risked a smile in Ardee's direction as he rose. He was disappointed to see she wasn't even looking at him. She was watching her brother struggle in the dust with a faint, cruel grin.

West got slowly to his feet. 'A good touch,' he muttered through gritted teeth as he stepped back into the circle. Jezal took his own mark, barely able to suppress his smile.

'Begin!' shouted Varuz.

West came on strongly again, but Jezal was warming to his task now. The

sounds of the audience muttered and swelled as he danced this way and that. He began to work the odd flourish into his movements, and the onlookers responded, 'oohs' and 'aahs' floating up as he flicked West's efforts away. He had never fenced so well, never moved so smoothly. The bigger man was starting to tire a little, the snap was going out of his cuts. Their long steels clashed together, scraped. Jezal twisted his right wrist and tore West's blade from his fingers, stepped in and slashed at him with his left.

'Gah!' West winced and dropped his short steel, hopping away and grabbing his forearm. A few drops of blood pattered across the ground.

'Two to nothing!' shouted Varuz.

The Crown Prince jumped up, his hat tumbling off, delighted by the sight of blood. 'Excellent!' he squawked, 'capital!' Others joined him on their feet, clapping loudly. Jezal basked in their approval, smiling wide, every muscle tingling with happiness. He understood now what he had been training for.

'Well fought, Jezal,' muttered West, a trickle of blood running down his forearm. 'You've got too good for me.'

'Sorry about the cut.' Jezal grinned. He wasn't sorry in the least.

'It's nothing. Just a scratch.' West strode away, frowning and holding his wrist. Nobody paid much attention to his exit, Jezal least of all. Sporting events are all about the winners.

Lord Marovia was the first to get up from the benches and offer his congratulations. 'What a promising young man,' he said, smiling warmly at Jezal, 'but do you think he can beat Bremer dan Gorst?'

Varuz gave Jezal a fatherly clap on the shoulder. 'I'm sure he can beat anyone, on the right day.'

'Hmm. Have you seen Gorst fence?'

'No, though I hear he is most impressive.'

'Oh, indeed – he is a devil.' The High Justice raised his bushy eyebrows. 'I look forward to seeing them meet. Have you ever considered a career in the law, Captain Luthar?'

Jezal was taken by surprise. 'Er, no, your Worship, that is . . . I am a soldier.'

'Of course you are. But battles and so forth can play hell with the nerves. If you should ever change your mind, perhaps I might have a place for you. I can always find a use for promising men.'

'Er, thank you.'

'Until the Contest then. Good luck, Captain,' he threw over his shoulder as he shuffled away. The implication was that he thought Jezal would need a great deal of it. His Highness Prince Ladisla was more optimistic.

'You're my man, Luthar!' he shouted, poking the air with his fingers as though they were fencing steels. 'I'm going to double my bet on you!'

Jezal bowed obsequiously. 'Your Highness is too kind.'

'You're my man! A soldier! A fencing man should fight for his country, eh, Varuz? Why isn't this Gorst a soldier?'

'I believe he is, your Highness,' said the Lord Marshal gently. 'He is a kinsman of Lord Brock, and serves with his personal guard.'

'Oh.' The Prince seemed confused for a moment, but soon perked up. 'But you're my man!' he shouted at Jezal, poking once more with his fingers, the

feather on his hat waving this way and that. 'You're the man for me!' He danced off towards the archway, decorative chain-mail gleaming.

'Very impressive.' Jezal whipped round, took an ungainly step back. Glokta, leering at him from his blind side. For a cripple, he had an uncanny knack of sneaking up on a man. 'What a happy chance for everyone that you didn't give it up after all.'

'I never had any intention of doing so,' snapped Jezal frostily.

Glokta sucked at his gums. 'If you say so, Captain.'

'I do.' Jezal turned rudely away, hoping that he never had occasion to speak to the loathsome man again. He found himself staring straight into Ardee's face, no more than a foot away.

'Gah,' he stammered, stepping back again.

'Jezal,' she said, 'I haven't seen you in a while.'

'Er . . .' He glanced nervously around. Glokta was shambling away. West was long gone. Varuz was busy holding forth to Lord Isher and a few others still remaining in the courtyard. They were unobserved. He had to speak to her. He ought to tell her straight out that he could not see her anymore. He owed her that much. 'Er ...'

'Nothing to say to me?'

'Er . . .' He turned swiftly on his heel and walked away, his shoulders prickling with shame.

The tedium of guard duty at the south gate seemed, after all that unexpected excitement, almost a mercy. Jezal was quite looking forward to standing idly by, watching people file in and out of the Agriont, listening to Lieutenant Kaspas's mindless babble. At least, he was until he got there.

Kaspas and the usual complement of armoured soldiers were clustered around the outer gates, where the old bridge across the moat passed between the two massive, white rendered towers of the gatehouse. As Jezal marched down to the end of the long tunnel he saw that there was someone with them. A small, harassed-looking fellow wearing spectacles. Jezal recognised him vaguely. Tomorrow he was called, some crony of the Lord Chamberlain. He had no reason to be here.

'Captain Luthar, what a happy chance!' Jezal jumped. It was that lunatic, Sulfur, sitting cross-legged on the ground behind him, his back against the sheer wall of the gatehouse.

'What the hell's he doing here?' snapped Jezal. Kaspas opened his mouth to speak, but Sulfur got in first.

'Don't mind me, Captain, I'm simply waiting for my master.'

'Your master?' He dreaded to think what manner of an idiot this idiot might serve.

'Indeed. He should be here very shortly.' Sulfur frowned up at the sun. 'He is already somewhat tardy, if the truth be told.'

'Really?'

'Yes.' The madman broke into a friendly smile once more. 'But he'll be along, Jezal, you can depend on it.'

First-name terms was too much to take. He hardly knew the man, and what he knew he didn't like. He opened his mouth to give him a piece of his mind, but Sulfur suddenly jumped up, grabbing his stick from the wall and brushing

himself down.

'Here they are!' he said, looking out across the moat. Jezal followed the idiot's eyes with his own.

A magnificent old man was striding purposefully across the bridge, bald head held high, a fabulous gown of shimmering red and silver flowing about him in the breeze. At his heels came a sickly-looking youth, head a little bowed as if in awe of the older man, holding a long staff out before him in upturned palms. A great brute of a man in a heavy fur cloak followed behind them, a good half head taller than the other two.

'What the . . .' Jezal trailed off. He seemed to recognise the old man from somewhere. Some lord perhaps, from the Open Council? Some foreign ambassador? Certainly he had an air of majesty. Jezal racked his brains as they approached, but could not place him.

The old man stopped before the gatehouse, swept Jezal, Kaspas, Morrow and the guards imperiously with glittering green eyes. 'Yoru,' he said.

Sulfur stepped forward, bowing low. 'Master Bayaz,' he murmured, in hushed tones of deep respect.

And that was it. That was why Jezal knew the man. He bore a definite resemblance to the statue of Bayaz in the Kingsway. The statue Jezal had run past so many times. A little fatter perhaps, but that expression: stern, wise, effortlessly commanding, was just the same. Jezal frowned. For the old man to be called by that name? He didn't like it. He didn't like the look of the lanky young man with the staff either. He liked the look of the old man's other companion even less.

West had often told Jezal that the Northmen found in Adua, usually skulking dishevelled by the docks or dirty drunk in gutters, were by no means typical of their people. Those that lived free in the far North, fighting, feuding, feasting, and doing whatever Northmen did, were of quite a different kind. A tall, fierce, handsome people, Jezal had always imagined, with a touch of romance about them. Strong, yet graceful. Wild, yet noble. Savage, yet cunning. The kind of men whose eyes are fixed always on the far horizon.

This was not one of those.

Never in his life had Jezal seen a more brutish-looking man. Even Fenris the Feared had seemed civilised by comparison. His face was like a whipped back, criss-crossed with ragged scars.

His nose was bent, pointing off a little sideways. One ear had a big notch out of it, one eye seemed a touch higher than the other, surrounded by a crescent-shaped wound. His whole face, in fact, was slightly beaten, broken, lop-sided, like that of a prize fighter who has fought a few bouts too many. His expression too, was that of one punch-drunk. He gawped up at the gatehouse, forehead furrowed, mouth hanging open, staring about him with a look of near animal stupidity.

He wore a long fur cloak, and a leather tunic set with gold, but this height of barbaric splendour only made him look more savage, and there was no missing the long, heavy sword at his belt. The Northman scratched at a big pink scar through the stubble on his cheek as he peered up at the sheer walls above, and Jezal noticed one of his fingers was missing. As though any further

evidence of a life of violence and savagery was necessary.

To let this hulking primitive into the Agriont? While they were at war with the Northmen? It was unthinkable! But Morrow was already sidling forward. 'The Lord Chamberlain is expecting you, gentlemen,' he gushed as he bowed and scraped his way towards the old man, 'if you would care to follow me—'

'One moment.' Jezal grabbed the under-secretary by the elbow and pulled him aside. 'Him too?' he asked incredulously, nodding over at the primitive in the cloak. 'We are at war, you know!'

'Lord Hoff was most specific!' Morrow shook his arm free, spectacles flashing. 'Keep him here if you wish, but you can explain it to the Lord Chamberlain!'

Jezal swallowed. That idea was not at all appealing. He glanced up at the old man, but could not look him in the eye for long. He had a mysterious air, an air of knowing something no one else could guess, and it was most unsettling.

'You . . . must . . . leave . . . your . . . weapons . . . here!' he shouted, speaking as slowly and clearly as possible.

'Happy to.' The Northman pulled the sword from his belt and held it out. It weighed heavily in Jezal's hands: a big, plain, brutal-looking weapon. He followed it with a long knife, then knelt and pulled another from his boot. He took a third from the small of his back, and then produced a thin blade from inside his sleeve, heaping them into Jezal's outstretched arms. The Northman smiled broadly. It was truly a hideous sight, the ragged scars twisting and puckering, making his face more lop-sided than ever.

'You can never have too many knives,' he growled in a deep, grinding voice. Nobody laughed, but he did not seem to care.

'Shall we go?' asked the old man.

'Without delay,' said Morrow, turning to leave.

'I'll come with you.' Jezal dumped his armload of weapons into Kaspas's hands.

'That really isn't necessary, Captain,' whined Morrow.

'I insist.' Once he was delivered to the Lord Chamberlain, the Northman could murder whomever he pleased: it would be someone else's problem. But until he got there Jezal might be blamed for whatever mischief he got up to, and he was damned if he was going to let that happen.

The guards stood aside, the strange procession passed through the gate. Morrow was first, whispering obsequious nothings over his shoulder to the old man in the splendid robe. The pale youth was next, followed by Sulfur. The nine-fingered Northman lumbered along at the back.

Jezal followed with his thumb in his belt, close to the hilt of his sword so he could get to it quickly, watching the savage intently for any sudden moves. After following him for a short while though, Jezal had to admit, the man gave no appearance of having murder in mind. If anything he looked curious, bemused, and somewhat embarrassed. He kept slowing, staring up at the buildings around him, shaking his head, scratching his face, muttering under his breath. He would occasionally horrify passers-by by smiling at them, but he seemed to present no greater threat and Jezal began to relax, at least until they reached the Square of Marshals.

The Northman stopped suddenly. Jezal fumbled for his sword, but the primitive's eyes were locked ahead, gazing at a fountain nearby. He moved slowly towards it, then cautiously raised a thick finger and poked at the glittering jet. Water splashed into his face and he blundered away, almost knocking Jezal down. 'A spring?' he whispered. 'But how?'

Mercy. The man was like a child. A six and a half foot child with a face like a butcher's block. 'There are pipes!' Jezal stamped on the paving. 'Beneath . . . the . . . ground!'

'Pipes,' echoed the primitive quietly, staring at the frothing water.

The others had moved some way ahead, close to the grand building in which Hoff had his offices. Jezal began to step away from the fountain, hoping to draw the witless savage with him. To Jezal's relief he followed, shaking his head and muttering 'pipes' to himself, over and over.

They entered the cool darkness of the Lord Chamberlain's ante-room. There were people seated on the benches around the walls, some of them giving the impression of having been waiting a very long time. They all stared as Morrow ushered the peculiar group straight into Hoff's offices. The spectacled secretary opened the heavy double doors and stood by while first the old bald man, then his crony with the stick, then the madman Sulfur, and finally the nine-fingered primitive walked in past him.

Jezal made to follow them, but Morrow stood in the doorway and blocked his path. 'Thank you so much for your help, Captain,' he said with a thin smile. 'You may return to the gate.' Jezal peered over his shoulder into the room beyond. He saw the Lord Chamberlain frowning behind a long table. Arch Lector Sult was beside him, grim and suspicious. High Justice Marovia was there too, a smile on his wrinkled face. Three members of the Closed Council.

Then Morrow shut the door in his face.

Next

‘I notice you have a new secretary,’ said Glokta, as though just in passing. The Arch Lector smiled. ‘Of course. The old one was not to my liking. He had a loose tongue, you know.’ Glokta paused, his wine glass halfway to his mouth. ‘He had been passing our secrets on to the Mercers,’ continued Sult carelessly, as if it was common knowledge. ‘I had been aware of it for some time. You needn’t worry though, he never learned anything I didn’t want him to know.’

Then . . . you knew who our traitor was. You knew all along. Glokta’s mind turned the events of the last few weeks around, pulled them apart and put them back together in this new light, trying them different ways until they fit, all the while struggling to conceal his surprise. *You left Rews’ confession where you knew your secretary would see it. You knew the Mercers would find out who was on the list, and you guessed what they would do, knowing it would only play into your hands and give you the shovel with which to bury them. Meanwhile, you steered my suspicions towards Kalyne when you knew who the leak was all along. The whole business unfolded precisely according to your plan.* The Arch Lector was looking back at him with a knowing smile. *And I bet you guess what I’m thinking right now. I have been almost as much a piece in this game as that snivelling worm of a secretary.* Glokta stifled a giggle. *How fortunate for me that I was a piece on the right side. I never suspected a thing.*

‘He betrayed us for a disappointingly small sum of money,’ continued Sult, his lip curling with distaste. ‘I daresay Kault would have given him ten times as much, if he had only had the wit to ask. The younger generation really have no ambition. They think they are a great deal cleverer than they are.’ He studied Glokta with his cool blue eyes. *I am part of the younger generation, more or less. I am justly humbled.*

‘Your secretary has been disciplined?’

The Arch Lector placed his glass carefully down on the table top, the base barely making a sound on the wood. ‘Oh yes. Most severely. It really isn’t necessary to spare him any further thought.’ *I bet it isn’t. Body found floating by the docks . . .* ‘I must say, I was greatly surprised when you fixed on Superior Kalyne as the source of our leak. The man was from the old guard. A few indulgences to look the other way over trifling matters, of course, but to betray the Inquisition? To sell our secrets to the Mercers?’ Sult snorted. ‘Never. You allowed your personal dislike for the man to cloud your judgement.’

‘He seemed the only possibility,’ muttered Glokta, but immediately regretted it. *Foolish, foolish. The mistake is made. Better just to keep your mouth shut.*

‘Seemed?’ The Arch Lector clicked his tongue in profound disapproval. ‘No, no, no, Inquisitor. Seemed is not good enough for us. In future, we’ll have just the facts, if you please. But don’t feel too badly about it – I allowed you to follow your instincts and, as things have turned out, your blunder has left our

position much the stronger. Kalyne has been removed from office,' *Body found floating* . . . 'and Superior Goyle is on his way from England to assume the role of Superior of Adua.'

Goyle? Coming here? That bastard, the new Superior of Adua? Glokta could not prevent his lip from curling.

'The two of you are not the greatest of friends, eh, Glokta?'

'He is a jailer, not an investigator. He is not interested in guilt or innocence. He is not interested in truth. He tortures for the thrill of it.'

'Oh, come now, Glokta. Are you telling me you feel no thrill when your prisoners spill their secrets? When they name the names? When they sign the confession?'

'I take no pleasure in it.' *I take no pleasure in anything.*

'And yet you do it so very well. In any case, Goyle is coming, and whatever you may think of him, he is one of us. A most capable and trustworthy man, dedicated to the service of crown and state. He was once a pupil of mine, you know.'

'Really?'

'Yes. He had your job . . . so there is some future in it after all!' The Arch Lector giggled at his own joke. Glokta gave a thin smile of his own. 'All in all, things have worked out very nicely, and you are to be congratulated on your part in it. A job well done.' *Well enough done that I am still alive, at least.* Sult raised his glass and they drank a joyless toast together, eyeing each other suspiciously over the rims of their glasses.

Glokta cleared his throat. 'Magister Kault mentioned something interesting before his unfortunate demise.'

'Go on.'

'The Mercers had a partner in their schemes. A senior partner, perhaps. A bank.'

'Huh. Turn a merchant over and there's always a banker underneath. What of it?'

'I believe these bankers knew about it all. The smuggling, the fraud, the murders even. I believe they encouraged it, maybe ordered it, so that they could get a good return on their loans. May I begin an investigation, your Eminence?'

'Which bank?'

'Valint and Balk.'

The Arch Lector seemed to consider a moment, staring at Glokta through his hard, blue eyes. *Does he already know about these particular bankers? Does he already know much more than me? What did Kault say? You want traitors, Glokta? Look in the House of Questions—*

'No,' snapped Sult. 'Those particular bankers are well connected. They are owed too many favours, and without Kault it will be difficult to prove anything. We got what we needed from the Mercers, and I have a more pressing task for you.'

Glokta looked up. *Another task?* 'I was looking forward to interviewing the prisoners we took at the Guildhall, your Eminence, it may be that—'

'No.' The Arch Lector swatted Glokta's words away with his gloved hand. 'That business could drag on for months. I will have Goyle handle it.' He

frowned. 'Unless you object?'

So I plough the field, sow the seed, water the crop, then Goyle reaps the harvest? Some justice. He humbly bowed his head. 'Of course not, your Eminence.'

'Good. You are probably aware of the unusual visitors we received yesterday.'

Visitors? For the past week Glokta had been in agony with his back. Yesterday he had struggled out of bed to watch that cretin Luthar fence, but otherwise he had been confined to his tiny room, virtually unable to move. 'I hadn't noticed,' he said simply.

'Bayaz, the First of the Magi.' Glokta gave his thin smile again, but the Arch Lector was not laughing.

'You're joking, of course.'

'If only.'

'A charlatan, your Eminence?'

'What else? But a most extraordinary one. Lucid, reasonable, clever. The deception is elaborate in the extreme.'

'You have spoken with him?'

'I have. He is remarkably convincing. He knows things, things he shouldn't know. He cannot be simply dismissed. Whoever he is, he has funding, and good sources of information.' The Arch Lector frowned deep. 'He has some renegade brute of a Northman with him.'

Glokta frowned. 'A Northman? It hardly seems their style. They strike me as most direct.'

'My very thoughts.'

'A spy for the Emperor then? The Gurkish?'

'Perhaps. The Kantics love a good intrigue, but they tend to stick to the shadows. These theatricals don't seem to have their mark. I suspect our answer may lie closer to home.'

'The nobles, your Eminence? Brock? Isher? Heugen?'

'Perhaps,' mused Sult, 'perhaps. They're annoyed enough. Or there's our old friend, the High Justice. He seemed a little too pleased about it all. He's plotting something, I can tell.'

The nobles, the High Justice, the Northmen, the Gurkish – it could be any one of them, or none – but why? 'I don't understand, Arch Lector. If they are simply spies, why go to all this trouble? Surely there are easier ways to get into the Agriont?'

'This is the thing.' Sult gave as bitter a grimace as Glokta had ever seen. 'There is an empty seat on the Closed Council, there always has been. A pointless tradition, a matter of etiquette, a chair reserved for a mythical figure, in any case dead for hundreds of years. Nobody ever supposed that anyone would come forward to claim it.'

'But he has?'

'He has! He has demanded it!' The Arch Lector got to his feet and strode around the table. 'I know! Unthinkable! Some spy, some liar from who knows where, privy to the workings of the very heart of our government! But he has some dusty papers, so it falls to *us* to discredit *him*! Can you believe it?'

Glokta could not. *But there hardly seems any purpose to saying so.*

'I have asked for time to investigate,' continued Sult, 'but the Closed Council

will not be put off indefinitely. We have only a week or two to expose this so-called Magus for the fraud he is. In the mean time, he and his companions are making themselves at home in an excellent suite of rooms in the Tower of Chains, and there is nothing we can do to prevent them wandering the Agriont, causing whatever mischief they please!' *There is something we could do*

...

'The Tower of Chains is very high. If somebody were to fall—'

'No. Not yet. We have already pushed our luck as far as it will go in certain circles. For the time being at least, we must tread carefully.'

'There is always the possibility of an interrogation. If we were to arrest them, I could soon find out who they are working for—'

'Tread carefully, I said! I want you to look into this Magus, Glokta, and his companions. Find out who they are, where they come from, what they are after. Above all, find out who is behind them, and why. We must discredit this would-be Bayaz before he can do any damage. After that you can use whatever means you please.' Sult turned and moved away to the window.

Glokta got up awkwardly, painfully from his chair. 'How shall I begin?'

'Follow them!' shouted the Arch Lector impatiently. 'Watch them! See who they speak to, what they are about. You're the Inquisitor, Glokta!' he snapped, without even looking round. 'Ask some questions!'

Better than Death

‘We’re looking for a woman,’ said the officer, staring at them suspiciously. ‘An escaped slave, a killer. Very dangerous.’

‘A woman, master?’ asked Yulwei, his brow wrinkled with confusion. ‘Dangerous, master?’

‘Yes, a woman!’ The officer waved his hand impatiently. ‘Tall, with a scar, hair cropped short. Well-armed, most likely, with a bow.’ Ferro stood there, tall and scarred, hair cropped short, bow over her shoulder, and looked down at the dusty ground. ‘She is wanted, by the highest of authorities! A thief and a murderer, many times over!’

Yulwei gave a humble smile and spread his hands. ‘We have seen no such person master. I and my son are unarmed, as you can see.’ Ferro looked down uncomfortably at the curved blade of the sword stuck through her belt, shining in the bright sun. The officer didn’t seem to notice though. He swatted at a fly as Yulwei blathered on. ‘Neither one of us would know what to do with such a thing as a bow, I can assure you. We trust in God to protect us, master, and in the Emperor’s matchless soldiers.’

The officer snorted. ‘Very wise, old man. What’s your business here?’

‘I am a merchant, on my way to Dagoska, to purchase spices,’ and he gave a grovelling bow, ‘with your kind permission.’

‘Trading with the pinks are you? Damn Union!’ The officer spat in the dust. ‘Still, a man has to make a living, I suppose, if a shameful one. Trade while you can, the pinks will be gone soon, swept back into the ocean!’ He puffed out his chest with pride. ‘The Emperor, Uthman-ul-Dosht, has sworn it! What do you think of that, old man?’

‘Oh, it will be a great day, a great day,’ said Yulwei, bowing low again, ‘may God bring it to us soon, master!’

The officer looked Ferro up and down. ‘Your son looks a strong lad. Perhaps he’d make a soldier.’ He took a step towards her and grabbed hold of her bare arm. ‘That’s a strong arm. That arm could draw a bow, I’d say, if it were taught. What do you say, boy? A man’s work, fighting for the glory of God, and your Emperor! Better than grubbing for a pittance!’ Ferro’s flesh crawled where his fingers touched her skin. Her other hand crept towards her knife.

‘Alas,’ said Yulwei quickly, ‘my son was born . . . simple. He scarcely speaks.’

‘Ah. A shame. The time may come when we need every man. Savages they may be, but these pinks can fight.’ The officer turned away and Ferro scowled after him. ‘Very well, you may go!’ He waved them on. The eyes of his soldiers, lounging in the shade of the palms around the road, followed them as they walked past, but without much interest.

Ferro held her tongue until the encampment had dwindled into the distance behind them, then she rounded on Yulwei. ‘Dagoska?’

‘To begin with,’ said the old man, staring off across the scrubby plain. ‘And then north.’

‘North?’

‘Across the Circle Sea to Adua.’

Across the sea? She stopped in the road. ‘I’m not fucking going there!’

‘Must you make everything so difficult, Ferro? Are you that happy here in Gurkhul?’

‘These northerners are mad, everyone knows it! Pinks, Union, or whatever. Mad! Godless!’

Yulwei raised an eyebrow at her. ‘I didn’t know you were so interested in God, Ferro.’

‘At least I know there is one!’ she shouted, pointing at the sky. ‘These pinks, they don’t think like us, like real people! We’ve no business with their kind! I’d rather stay among the Gurkish! Besides, I’ve scores to settle here.’

‘What scores? Going to kill Uthman?’

She frowned. ‘Perhaps I will.’

‘Huh.’ Yulwei turned and headed off up the road. ‘They’re looking for you, Ferro, in case you hadn’t noticed. You wouldn’t get ten strides without my help. They’ve still got that cage waiting, remember? The one in front of the palace? They are anxious to fill it.’ Ferro ground her teeth. ‘Uthman is the Emperor now. Ul-Dosht, they call him. The mighty! The merciless! Greatest Emperor for a hundred years, they are saying already. Kill the Emperor!’ Yulwei chuckled to himself. ‘You’re quite a character alright. Quite a character.’

Ferro scowled as she followed the old man up the hill. She wasn’t looking to be anyone’s character. Yulwei could make these soldiers see whatever he pleased, and that was a smart trick, but she’d be damned if she was going north. What business did she have with those godless pinks?

Yulwei was still chuckling away as she drew level with him. ‘Kill the Emperor.’ He shook his head. ‘He’ll just have to wait until you get back. You owe me, remember?’

Ferro grabbed him by the sinewy arm. ‘I don’t remember you saying anything about crossing the sea!’

‘I don’t remember your asking, Maljinn, and you should be glad you didn’t!’ He peeled her fingers gently away. ‘Your corpse might be drying nicely in the desert, instead of grumbling in my ear, all sleek and healthy – think on that a while.’

That shut her up for the time being. She walked along in silence, scowling out across the scrubby landscape, sandals crunching on the dry dirt of the road. She looked sidelong at the old man. He’d saved her life with his tricks, that couldn’t be denied.

But she’d be damned if she was going north.

The fortress was concealed in a rocky cove, but from where they were, high up on the bluff with the fierce sun behind them, Ferro could see the shape of it well enough. A high wall enclosed neat rows of buildings, enough to make a small town. Next to the them, built out into the water, were long wharves. Moored to the wharves were ships.

Huge ships.

Towers of wood, floating fortresses. Ferro had never seen ships half that size. Their masts were a dark forest against the bright water behind. Ten were docked below them, and further out in the bay two more were cutting slowly through the waves, great sails billowing, tiny figures crawling on the decks and in amongst the spider's web of ropes above.

'I see twelve,' murmured Yulwei, 'but your eyes are the sharper.'

Ferro looked out across the water. Further round the curving shore, twenty miles away perhaps, she could see another fortress, another set of wharves. 'There are more over there,' she said, 'eight or nine, and those ones are bigger.'

'Bigger than these?'

'A lot bigger.'

'God's breath!' muttered Yulwei to himself. 'The Gurkish never built ships so big before, not half so big, nor half so many. There is not the wood in all the South for such a fleet. They must have bought it from the north, from the Styrians, maybe.'

Ferro cared nothing for boats, or wood, or the north. 'So?' 'With a fleet this size, the Gurkish will be a power at sea. They could take Dagoska from the bay, invade Westport even.'

The pointless names of far-away places. 'So?'

'You don't understand, Ferro. I must warn the others. We must make haste, now!' He pushed himself up from the ground and hurried back towards the road.

Ferro grunted. She watched the big wooden tubs moving back and forth in the bay for a moment longer, then she got up and followed Yulwei. Great ships or tiny ships, it meant nothing to her. The Gurkish could take all the pinks in the world for slaves as far as she was concerned.

If that meant they left the real people alone.

'Out of the way!' The soldier spurred his horse right at them, raising his whip.

'A thousand pardons, master!' whined Yulwei, grovelling to the ground, scuttling off into the grass beside the road, pulling Ferro reluctantly by the elbow. She stood in the scrub, watching the column shamle slowly by. Thin figures, ragged, dirty, vacant, hands bound tightly, hollow eyes on the ground. Men and women, all ages, children even. A hundred or more. Six guards rode alongside them, easy in their tall saddles, whips rolled up in their hands.

'Slaves.' Ferro licked her dry lips.

'The people of Kadir have risen up,' said Yulwei, frowning at the miserable procession. 'They wished no longer to be part of the glorious nation of Gurkhul, and thought the death of the Emperor might be their chance to leave. It seems they were wrong. The new Emperor is harder even than the last, eh, Ferro?'

Their rebellion has failed already. It seems your friend Uthman has taken slaves as punishment.'

Ferro watched a scrawny girl limping slowly, bare feet trailing in the dust. Thirteen years old? It was hard to tell. Her face was dirty and listless. There was a scabby cut across her forehead, others on the back of her arm. Whip marks. Ferro swallowed, watched the girl toiling along. An old man, just in

front of her, tripped and sprawled face first into the road, making the whole column stumble to a halt.

‘Move!’ barked one of the riders, spurring his horse forward. ‘On your feet!’ The old man struggled in the dust. ‘Move!’ The soldier’s whip cracked, leaving a long red mark across the man’s scrawny back. Ferro twitched and winced at the sound, and her back began to tingle.

Where the scars were.

Almost as if she’d been whipped herself.

No one whips Ferro Maljinn and lives. Not any more. She shrugged the bow off her shoulder.

‘Peace, Ferro!’ hissed Yulwei, grabbing her by the arm. ‘There’s nothing you can do for them!’

The girl bent down, helping the old slave to his feet. The whip cracked again, catching them both, and there was a yelp of pain. Was it the girl or the man who had cried out?

Or had it been Ferro herself?

She shook Yulwei’s hand off, reaching for an arrow. ‘I can kill this bastard!’ she snarled. The soldier’s head snapped round to look at them, curious. Yulwei seized hold of her hand.

‘What then?’ he hissed. ‘If you killed all six of them, what then? Have you food and water for a hundred slaves? Eh? You have it well concealed! And when the column is missed? Eh? And their guards found slaughtered? What then, killer? Will you hide a hundred slaves out here? Because I cannot!’

Ferro stared into Yulwei’s black eyes, her teeth grinding together, her breath snorting fast through her nose. She wondered whether or not to try and kill him again.

No.

He was right, damn him. Slowly, she pushed the anger back, as far down as it would go. She shoved the arrow away, and turned back towards the column. She watched the old slave stumble on, and the girl after him, fury gnawing at her guts like hunger.

‘You!’ called the soldier, nudging his horse over towards them.

‘You’ve done it now!’ hissed Yulwei, then he bowed to the guard, smiling, scraping. ‘My apologies master, my son is . . .’

‘Shut your mouth, old man!’ The soldier looked down at Ferro from his saddle. ‘Well, boy, do you like her?’

‘What?’ she hissed, through gritted teeth.

‘No need to be shy,’ chuckled the soldier, ‘I’ve seen you looking.’ He turned towards the column. ‘Hold them up there!’ he shouted, and the slaves stumbled to a halt. He leaned from his saddle and grabbed the scrawny girl under the armpit, dragging her roughly out of the column.

‘She’s a good one,’ he said, pulling her towards Ferro. ‘Bit young, but she’s ready. Clean up nice, she will. Bit of a limp but that’ll heal, we’ve been driving ’em hard. Good teeth . . . show him your teeth, bitch!’ The girl’s cracked lips curled back slowly. ‘Good teeth. What do you say boy? Ten in gold for her! It’s a good price!’

Ferro stood there, staring. The girl looked dumbly back with big, dead eyes.

‘Look,’ said the soldier, leaning down from his saddle. ‘She’s worth twice

that, and there's no danger in it! When we get to Shaffa, I'll tell them she died out here in the dust. No one will wonder at that, it happens all the time! I get ten, and you save ten! Everyone wins!

Everyone wins. Ferro stared up at the guard. He pulled his helmet off, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. 'Peace, Ferro,' whispered Yulwei.

'Alright, eight!' Shouted the soldier. 'She's got a nice smile! Show him a smile, bitch!' The corner of the girl's mouth twitched slightly. 'There, see! Eight, and you're stealing from me!'

Ferro's fists were clenched, nails digging into her palms. 'Peace, Ferro,' whispered Yulwei, with a warning note in his voice.

'God's teeth but you drive a bargain boy! Seven, and that's my last offer. Seven, damn it!' The soldier waved his helmet around in frustration. 'Use her gently, in five years she'll be worth more! It's an investment!'

The soldier's face was just a few feet away. She could see each tiny bead of sweat forming on his forehead, each stubbly hair on his cheeks, each blemish, nick, and pore on his skin. She could smell him, almost.

The truly thirsty will drink piss, or salt water, or oil, however bad for them, so great is their need to drink. Ferro had seen it often in the badlands. That was the extent of her need to kill this man now. She wanted to tear him with her bare hands, to choke the life from him, to rip his face with her teeth. The desire was almost too strong to resist. 'Peace!' hissed Yulwei.

'I can't afford her,' Ferro heard herself saying.

'You might have said so before, boy, and saved me the trouble!' The soldier stuck his helmet back on. 'Still, I can't blame you for looking. She's a good one.' He reached down and grabbed the girl under the arm, dragging her back towards the others. 'They'll get twenty for her in Shaffa!' he shouted over his shoulder. The column moved on. Ferro watched the girl until the slaves disappeared over a rise, stumbling, limping, shambling towards slavery.

She felt cold now, cold and empty. She wished she had killed the guard, whatever the cost. Killing him could have filled that empty space, if only for a while. That was how it worked. 'I walked in a column like that,' she said slowly.

Yulwei gave a long sigh. 'I know, Ferro, I know, but fate has chosen you for saving. Be grateful for it, if you know how.'

'You should have let me kill him.'

'Eugh,' clucked the old man in disgust, 'I do declare, you'd kill the whole world if you could. Is there anything but killing in you Ferro?'

'There used to be,' she muttered, 'but they whip it out of you. They whip you until they're sure there's nothing left.' Yulwei stood there, with that pitying look on his face. Strange, how it didn't make her angry any more.

'I'm sorry, Ferro. Sorry for you and for them.' He stepped back into the road, shaking his head. 'But it's better than death.'

She stayed for a moment, watching the dust rising from the distant column.

'The same,' she whispered to herself.

Sore Thumb

Logen leaned against the parapet, squinted into the morning sun, and took in the view. He'd done the same, it felt long ago now, from the balcony of his room at the library. The two views could hardly have been more different. Sunrise over the jagged carpet of buildings on the one hand, hot and glaring bright and full of distant noise. The cold and misty valley on the other, soft and empty and still as death. He remembered that morning, remembered how he'd felt like a different man. He certainly felt a different man now. A stupid man. Small, scared, ugly, and confused.

'Logen.' Malacus stepped out onto the balcony to stand beside him, smiled up at the sun and out over the city to the sparkling bay, already busy with ships. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

'If you say so, but I'm not sure I see it. All those people.' Logen gave a sweaty shiver. 'It's not right. It frightens me.'

'Frightened? You?'

'Always.' Logen had barely slept since they arrived. It was never properly dark here, never properly quiet. It was too hot, too close, too stinking. Enemies might be terrifying, but enemies could be fought, and put an end to. Logen could understand their hatred. There was no fighting the faceless, careless, rumbling city. It hated everything. 'This is no place for me. I'll be glad to leave.'

'We might not be leaving for a while.'

'I know.' Logen took a deep breath. 'That's why I'm going to go down and look at this Agriont, and find out what I can about it. Some things have to be done. It's better to do them than to live with the fear of them. That's what my father used to tell me.'

'Good advice. I'll come with you.'

'You will not.' Bayaz was in the doorway, glaring out at his apprentice. 'Your progress over the last few weeks has been a disgrace, even for you.' He stepped through into the open air. 'I suggest that while we are idle, waiting on His Majesty's pleasure, you should take the opportunity to study. Another such chance may be a long time coming.'

Malacus hurried back inside with no backward glances. He knew better than to dawdle with his master in this mood. Bayaz had lost all his good humour as soon as they arrived at the Agriont, and it didn't look like coming back. Logen could hardly blame him, they'd been treated more like prisoners than guests. He didn't know much about manners, but he could guess the meaning of hard stares from everyone and guards outside the door.

'You wouldn't believe how it's grown,' growled Bayaz, frowning out at the great sweep of city. 'I remember when Adua was barely more than a huddle of shacks, squeezed in round the House of the Maker like flies round a fresh turd. Before there was an Agriont. Before there was a Union, even. They weren't

half so proud in those days, I can tell you. They worshipped the Maker like a god.'

He noisily hawked up a lump of phlegm and spat it out into the air. Logen watched it clear the moat and vanish somewhere in amongst the white buildings below. 'I gave them this,' hissed Bayaz. Logen felt the unpleasant creeping sensation that always seemed to accompany the old wizard's displeasure. 'I gave them freedom, and this is the thanks I get? The scorn of clerks? Of swollen-headed old errand-boys?' A trip down into the suspicion and madness below began to seem like a merciful release. Logen edged towards the door and ducked back into the room beyond.

If they were prisoners here then Logen had been in some harder cells, he had to admit. Their round living room was fit for a King, to his mind at least: heavy chairs of dark wood with delicate carvings, thick hangings on the walls showing woods and hunting scenes. Bethod would most likely have felt at home in such a room. Logen felt like an oaf there, always on his toes in case he broke something. A tall jar stood on a table in the chamber's centre, its sides painted with bright flowers. Logen eyed it suspiciously as he made for the long stair down into the Agriont.

'Logen!' Bayaz was framed in the doorway, frowning after him. 'Take care. The place may seem strange, but the people are stranger still.'

The water frothed and gurgled, spurting up in a narrow jet from a metal tube carved like a fish's mouth, then splashing back down into a wide stone basin. A fountain, the proud young man had called it. Pipes, beneath the earth, he'd said. Logen pictured underground streams, coursing just beneath his feet, washing at the foundations of the place. The thought made him feel slightly dizzy.

The square was vast – a great plain of flat stones, hemmed in by sheer cliffs of white buildings. Hollow cliffs, covered with pillars and carvings, glittering with tall windows, crawling with people. Something strange seemed to be happening today. All around the distant edges of the square an enormous, sloping structure of wooden beams was being built. An army of workmen swarmed over it, hacking and bludgeoning, swinging at pegs and joints, hurling bad-tempered shouts at each other. All around them were mountains of planks and logs, barrels of nails, stacks of tools, enough to build ten mighty halls, and more besides. In places the structure was already far above the ground, its uprights soaring into the air like the masts of great ships, as high as the monstrous buildings behind.

Logen stood, hands on hips, gawping at the enormous wooden skeleton, but its purpose was a mystery. He stepped up to a short muscular man in a leather apron, sawing furiously at a plank. 'What's this?'

'Eh?' The man didn't even look up from his task.

'This. What's it for?'

The saw bit through the wood, the off-cut clattered to the ground. The carpenter hefted the rest of the plank onto a pile nearby. He turned round, eyeing Logen suspiciously, wiping sweat from his glistening forehead.

'Stands. Seating.' Logen stared vacantly back at him. How could something stand and sit at once? 'For the Contest!' the carpenter shouted in his face. Logen backed slowly away. Gibberish. Nonsense words. He turned and hurried

off, keeping well clear of the huge wooden structures and the men clambering over them.

He blundered out onto a broad lane, a deep gorge between looming white buildings. Statues faced each other down either side, much larger than life, frowning over the heads of the many people hurrying between. The nearest of the carvings seemed strangely familiar. Logen walked over to it, looked it up and down, then grinned to himself. The First of the Magi had gained some weight since it was sculpted. Too much good eating at the library, maybe. Logen turned towards a small man with a black hat, walking by with a big book under his arm.

'Bayaz,' he said, pointing up at the statue. 'Friend of mine.' The man stared at him, at the statue, back at him, and hurried away.

The carvings marched on down either side of the avenue. Kings of the Union, Logen guessed, stood in line on the left. Some carried swords, some scrolls or tiny ships. One had a dog at his feet, another a sheaf of wheat under his arm, but otherwise there wasn't much to tell them apart. They all had the same tall crowns and the same stern frowns. You wouldn't have thought to look at them that they'd ever said a stupid word, or done a stupid thing, or had to take a shit in all their lives.

Logen heard rapid footsteps thumping up behind him, and he turned just in time to see the proud young man from the gate, pounding down the avenue, shirt soaked through with sweat. Logen wondered where he might be going in such a hurry, but he was damned if he was going to run to catch up with him, not in this heat. Anyway, there were plenty more mysteries that needed solving.

The lane opened out into a great, green space, scooped out from the country by giant hands and dropped in amongst the tall buildings, but like no countryside that Logen had ever seen. The grass was a smooth, even blanket of vivid green, shaved almost to the ground. There were flowers, but growing in rows and circles and straight lines of bright colour. There were lush bushes and trees, all squeezed and fenced and clipped into unnatural shapes. There was water, too – streams bubbling over stone steps, a great flat pond with sad-looking trees trailing round its edge.

Logen wandered through this square-edged greenery, boots crunching on a path made of tiny grey stones. There were lots of people gathered here, squeezed in together to enjoy the sun. They sat in boats on the miniature lake, rowing gently round and round, going nowhere. They lazed on the lawns, ate, drank and babbled to one another. Some of them would point at Logen and shout, or whisper, or slope away.

They were a strange-seeming crowd, especially the women. Pale and ghostly, swaddled in elaborate dresses, hair scraped up and piled and stuck through with pins and combs and great weird feathers or useless tiny hats. They seemed like the big jar in the round chamber – too thin and delicate to be any use, and further spoiled by too much decoration. But it had been a long time, and he smiled at them cheerfully, on the off chance. Some looked shocked, others gasped in horror. Logen sighed. The old magic was still there.

Further on, in another wide square, Logen stopped to watch a group of soldiers practice. These weren't beggars, or girlish youths, these were solid-

looking men wearing heavy armour, breastplates and greaves polished mirror bright, long spears shouldered. They stood together, each man the same as the one beside, in four squares of maybe fifty men each, still as the statues in the avenue.

At a bellow from a short man in a red jacket – their chief, Logen reckoned – the whole crowd turned, levelled their spears and began to advance across the square, heavy boots tramping together. Each man the same, armed the same, moving the same. It was quite a sight, all that shining metal moving steadily in bristling squares, spear points glittering, like some great square hedgehog with two hundred legs. Deadly enough, no doubt, on a big flat space, against an imaginary enemy right in front. How it would work on broken rocks, in the tipping rain, in a tangled wood, Logen was less sure. Those men would tire quickly, in all that weight of armour, and if the squares could be broken, what would they do? Men who were used to always having others at their shoulder? Could they fight alone?

He plodded on, through wide courtyards and neat gardens, past gurgling fountains and proud statues, down clean lanes and broad avenues. He wandered up and down narrow stairways, across bridges over streams, over roads, over other bridges. He saw guards in a dozen different splendid liveries, guarding a hundred different gates and walls and doors, every one eyeing him with the same deep suspicion. The sun climbed in the sky, the tall white buildings slid by until Logen was footsore and half lost, his neck aching from looking always upwards.

The only constant was the monstrous tower which loomed high, high over everything else, making the greatest of the great buildings seem mean. It was always there, glimpsed out of the corner of your eye, peering over the tops of the roofs in the distance. Logen's footsteps dragged him slowly closer and closer to it, until he came to a neglected corner of the citadel in its very shadow.

He found an old bench beside a ragged lawn near a great crumbling building, coated with moss and ivy, its steep roofs sagging in the middles and missing tiles. He slumped down, puffing out his cheeks, and frowned up at that enormous shape beyond the walls, cut out dark against the blue, a man made mountain of dry, stark, dead stones. No plants clung to that looming mass, not even a clump of moss in the cracks between the great blocks. The House of the Maker, Bayaz had called it. It looked like no house that Logen had ever seen. There were no roofs above, no doors or windows in those naked walls. A cluster of mighty, sharp-edged tiers of rock. What need could there ever be to build a thing so big? Who was this Maker anyway? Was this all he made? A great big, useless house?

'You mind if I sit?' There was a woman looking down at Logen, more what he would have called a woman than those strange, ghostly things in the park. A pretty woman in a white dress, face framed by dark hair.

'Do I mind? No. It's a funny thing, but no one else wants to sit with me.'

She dropped down at the far end of the bench, resting her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees, gazing up without interest at the looming tower. 'Perhaps they're afraid of you.'

Logen watched a man hurry past with a sheaf of papers under his arm,

staring at him with wide eyes. 'I'm starting to think the same thing.'

'You do look a little dangerous.'

'Hideous is the word you're looking for.'

'I usually find the words I'm looking for, and I say dangerous.'

'Well, looks can lie.'

She lifted an eyebrow, looking him slowly up and down. 'You must be a man of peace then.'

'Huh . . . not entirely.' They looked at each other sidelong. She didn't seem afraid, or scornful, or even interested. 'Why aren't you scared?'

'I'm from England, I know your people. Besides,' and she let her head drop onto the back of the bench, 'no one else will talk to me. I'm desperate.'

Logen stared at the stump of his middle finger, wagged it back and forth as far as it would go. 'You'd have to be. I'm Logen.'

'Good for you. I'm nobody.'

'Everybody's somebody.'

'Not me. I'm nothing. I'm invisible.'

Logen frowned at her, turned sideways to him, lounging back on the bench in the sun, her long smooth neck stretched out, chest rising and falling gently. 'I see you.'

She rolled her head to look at him. 'You . . . are a gentleman.'

Logen snorted with laughter. He'd been called a lot of things in his time, but never that. The young woman didn't join him in his amusement. 'I don't belong here,' she muttered to herself.

'Neither one of us.'

'No. But this is my home.' She got up from the bench. 'Goodbye, Logen.'

'Fare you well, nobody.' He watched her turn and walk slowly away, shaking his head. Bayaz had been right. The place was strange, but the people were stranger still.

Logen woke with a painful start, blinked and stared wildly about him. Dark. Not quite entirely dark, of course, there was still the ever-present glow of the city. He thought he'd heard something, but there was nothing now. It was hot. Hot and close and strangling, even with the sticky draught from the open window. He groaned, threw the damp blankets down around his waist, rubbed the sweat from his chest and wiped it on the wall behind him. The light nagged at his eyelids. And that was not the worst of his problems. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he needs to piss.

Unfortunately, you couldn't just piss in a pot in this place. They had a special thing, like a flat wooden shelf with a hole in it, in a little room. He'd peered down into that hole when they first arrived, wondering what it could be for. It seemed like a long way down, and it smelled bad. Malacus had explained it to him. A pointless and barbaric invention. You had to sit there, on the hard wood, an unpleasant draught blowing round your fruits. But that was civilisation, so far as Logen could tell. People with nothing better to do, dreaming up ways to make easy things difficult.

He floundered out of bed and picked his way to where he remembered the door being, bent over with his arms feeling about in front of him. Too light to sleep, but too dark to actually see anything. 'Fucking civilisation,' he muttered to himself as he fumbled with the latch on the door, sliding his bare feet

cautiously into the big circular room at the centre of their chambers.

It was cool in here, very cool. The cold air felt good on his bare skin after the damp heat of his bedroom. Why wasn't he sleeping in here, instead of that oven next door? He squinted at the shadowy walls, face all screwed up with the painful fuzz of sleep, trying to work out which blurry door led to the pissing-shelf. Knowing his luck he'd probably blunder into Bayaz' room and accidentally piss on the First of the Magi while he was asleep. That would be just the thing to sweeten the wizard's temper.

He took a step forward. There was a clunk and a rattle as his leg barged into the corner of the table. He cursed, grabbing at his bruised shin – then he remembered the jar. He lunged and caught it by the rim just before it fell. His eyes were adjusting to the half-light now, and he could just make out the flowers painted on the cold, shiny surface. He moved to put it back on the table, but then it occurred to him. Why go any further when he had a perfectly good pot right there? He glanced furtively round the room, swinging the jar into position . . . then froze.

He was not alone.

A tall, slender figure, vague in the half-light. He could just make out long hair, blowing gently in the breeze from the open window. He strained against the darkness, but he couldn't see the face.

'Logen . . .' A woman's voice, soft and low. He didn't like the sound of it one bit. It was cold in the room, very cold. He took a firm grip on the jar.

'Who are you?' he croaked, voice suddenly loud in the dead stillness. Was he dreaming? He shook his head, squeezed the jar in his hand. It all felt real. Horribly real.

'Logen . . .' The woman moved silently towards him. Soft light from the window caught the side of her face. A white cheek, a shadowy eye-socket, the corner of a mouth, then sunk in darkness again. There was something familiar . . . Logen's mind fumbled for it as he backed away, eyes fixed on her outline, keeping the table between them.

'What do you want?' He had a cold feeling in his chest, a bad feeling. He knew he should be shouting for help, raising the others, but somehow he had to know who it was. Had to know. The air was freezing, Logen could almost see his breath smoking before his face. His wife was dead, he knew that, dead and cold and gone back to the mud, long ago and far away. He'd seen the village, burned to ashes, full of corpses. His wife was dead . . . and yet . . .

'Thelfi?' he whispered.

'Logen . . .' Her voice! Her voice! His mouth dropped open. She reached out for him, through the light from the window. Pale hand, pale fingers, long, white nails. The room was icy, icy cold. 'Logen!'

'You're dead!' He raised the jar, ready to smash it down on her head. The hand reached out, fingers spreading wide.

Suddenly, the room was bright as day. Brighter. Brilliant, searing bright. The murky outlines of the doors, the furniture, were transformed into hard white edges, black shadows. Logen squeezed his eyes shut, shielded them with his arm, dropped back gasping against the wall. There was a deafening crash like a landslide, a tearing and splintering like a great tree falling, a stink of burning wood. Logen opened one eye a crack, peered out from between his

fingers.

The chamber was strangely altered. Dark, once more, but less dark than before. Light filtered in through a great ragged hole in the wall where the window used to be. Two of the chairs had gone, a third teetered on three legs, broken edges glowing faintly, smouldering like sticks that had been a long time in a fire. The table, standing right beside him just a moment before, was sheared in half on the other side of the room. Part of the ceiling had been torn away from the rafters and the floor was littered with chunks of stone and plaster, broken lengths of wood and fragments of glass. Of the strange woman there was no sign.

Bayaz picked his way unsteadily through the wreckage towards the gaping hole in the wall, nightshirt flapping around his thick calves, and peered out into the night. 'It's gone.'

'It?' Logen stared at the steaming hole. 'She knew my name . . .'

The wizard stumbled over to the last remaining intact chair and flung himself into it like a man exhausted. 'An Eater, perhaps. Sent by Khalul.'

'A what?' asked Logen, baffled. 'Sent by who?'

Bayaz wiped sweat from his face. 'You wanted not to know.'

'That's true.' Logen couldn't deny it. He rubbed at his chin, staring out of the ragged patch of night sky, wondering whether now might be a good time to change his mind. But by then it was too late. There was a frantic hammering at the door.

'Get that, would you?' Logen stumbled stupidly through the debris and slid back the bolt. An angry-looking guard shouldered his way past, a lamp in one hand, drawn sword in the other.

'There was a noise!' The light from his lamp swept over the wreckage, found the ragged edge of the ripped plaster, the broken stone, the empty night sky beyond. 'Shit,' he whispered.

'We had an uninvited guest,' muttered Logen.

'Er . . . I must notify . . .' the guard looked thoroughly confused ' . . . somebody.' He tripped and nearly fell over a fallen beam as he backed towards the door. Logen heard his footsteps rattling away down the stairs.

'What's an Eater?' There was no reply. The wizard was asleep, eyes closed, a deep frown on his face, chest moving slowly. Logen looked down. He was surprised to see he still had the pot, beautiful and delicate, clasped tightly in his right hand. He carefully swept clear a space on the floor and set the jar down, in amongst the wreckage.

One of the doors banged open and Logen's heart jumped. It was Malacus, wild-eyed and staring, hair sticking up off his head at all angles. 'What the . . .' He stumbled to the hole and peered gingerly out into the night. 'Shit!'

'Malacus, what's an Eater?'

Quai's head snapped round to look at Logen, his face a picture of horror. 'It's forbidden,' he whispered, 'to eat the flesh of men ...'

Questions

Glokta heaped porridge into his mouth as fast as he could, hoping to get half a meal's worth down before his gorge began to rise. He swallowed, coughed, shuddered. He shoved the bowl away, as though its very presence offended him. *Which, in fact, it does.* 'This had better be important, Severard,' he grumbled.

The Practical scraped his greasy hair back with one hand. 'Depends what you mean by important. It's about our magical friends.'

'Ah, the First of the Magi and his bold companions. What about them?'

'There was some manner of a disturbance at their chambers last night. Someone broke in, they say. There was a fight of some sort. Seems as if some damage was done.'

'Someone? Some sort? Some damage?' Glokta gave a disapproving shake of his head. 'Seems? Seems isn't good enough for us, Severard.'

'Well it'll have to be, this time. The guard was a little thin on the details. Looked damn worried, if you ask me.' Severard sprawled a little deeper into his chair, shoulders hunching up around his ears. 'Someone needs to go and look into it, might as well be us. You can get a good look at them, close up. Ask them some questions, maybe.'

'Where are they?'

'You'll love this. The Tower of Chains.'

Glokta scowled as he sucked a few bits of porridge from his empty gums. *Of course. And right at the top, I bet. Lots of steps.* 'Anything else?'

'The Northman went for a stroll yesterday, walked in circles round half the Agriont. We watched him, of course.' The Practical sniffed and adjusted his mask. 'Ugly bastard.'

'Ah, the infamous Northman. Did he commit any outrages? Rape and murder, buildings aflame, that type of thing?'

'Not much, being honest. A tedious morning for everyone. Wandered around and gawped at things. He spoke to a couple of people.'

'Anyone we know?'

'No one important. One of the carpenters working on the stands for the Contest. A clerk on the Kingsway. There was some girl near the University. He spoke to her for a while.'

'A girl?'

Severard's eyes grinned. 'That's right, and a nice-looking one too. What was her name?' He snapped his fingers. 'I made sure I found it out. Her brother's with the King's Own . . . West, something West ...'

'Ardee.'

'That's the one! You know her?'

'Hmm.' Glokta licked at his empty gums. *She asked me how I was. I remember.* 'What did they have to talk about?'

The Practical raised his eyebrows. 'Probably nothing. She's from Angland though, not been in the city long. Might be some connection. You want me to bring her in? We could soon find out.'

'No!' snapped Glokta. 'No. No need. Her brother used to be a friend of mine.'

'Used to be.'

'No one touches her, Severard, you hear?'

The Practical shrugged. 'If you say so, Inquisitor. If you say so.'

'I do.'

There was a pause. 'So we're done with the Mercers then, are we?' Severard sounded almost wistful.

'It would seem so. They're finished. Nothing but some cleaning up to do.'

'Some lucrative cleaning up, I daresay.'

'I daresay,' said Glokta sourly. 'But his Eminence feels our talents will be better used elsewhere.' *Like watching fake wizards.* 'Hope you didn't lose out on your little property by the docks.'

Severard shrugged. 'I wouldn't be surprised if you need somewhere away from prying eyes again, before too long. It'll still be there. At the right price. Shame to leave a job half done is all.'

True. Glokta paused for a moment, considering. *Dangerous.*

The Arch Lector said go no further. Very dangerous, to disobey, and yet I smell something. It niggles, to leave a loose end, whatever his Eminence might say. 'There might be one more thing.'

'Really?'

'Yes, but keep it subtle. Do you know anything about banks?'

'Big buildings. They lend people money.'

Glokta gave a thin smile. 'I had no idea you were such an expert. There's one in particular I'm interested in. Name of Valint and Balk.'

'Never heard of them, but I can ask around.'

'Just keep it discreet, Severard, do you understand me? No one can know about this. I mean it.'

'Discretion is what I'm all about, chief, ask anyone. Discreet. That's me. Known for it.'

'You'd better be, Severard. You had better be.' *Or it could be both our heads.*

Glokta sat, wedged into the embrasure with his back against the stones and his left leg stretched out in front of him – a searing, pulsing furnace of pain. He expected pain of course, every moment of every day. *But this is something just a bit special.*

Every breath was a rattling moan through rigid jaws. Every tiniest movement was a mighty task. He remembered how Marshal Varuz had made him run up and down these steps when he was training for the Contest, years ago. *I took them three at a time, up and down without a second thought. Now look at me. Who would have thought it could come to this?*

His trembling body ran with sweat, his stinging eyes ran with tears, his burning nose dripped watery snot. *All this water flowing out of me, and yet I'm thirsty as hell. Where's the sense in that? Where was the sense in any of it? What if someone should come past, and see me like this? The terrifying scourge of the*

Inquisition, flopped on his arse in a window, barely able to move? Will I force a nonchalant smile onto this rigid mask of agony? Will I pretend that all is well? That I often come here, to sprawl beside the stairs? Or will I weep and scream and beg for help?

But no one passed. He lay there, wedged in that narrow space, three-quarters of the way up the Tower of Chains, the back of his head resting on the cool stones, his trembling knees drawn up in front of him. *Sand dan Glokta, master swordsman, dashing cavalry officer, what glorious future might he have in front of him? There was a time when I could run for hours. Run and run and never tire.* He could feel a trickle of sweat running down his back. *Why do I do this? Why the hell would anyone do this? I could stop today. I could go home to mother. But then what?*

Then what?

‘Inquisitor, I’m glad you’re here.’

Good for you, bastard. I’m not. Glokta leaned against the wall at the top of the stairs, such teeth as he had grinding against his gums.

‘They’re inside, it’s quite a mess . . .’ Glokta’s hand trembled, the tip of his cane rattling against the stones. His head swam. The guard was blurry and dim through his twitching eyelids. ‘Are you alright?’ He loomed forwards, one arm outstretched.

Glokta looked up. ‘Just get the fucking door, fool!’

The man jumped away, hurried to the door and pushed it open. Every part of Glokta longed to give up and sprawl on his face, but he willed himself upright. He forced one foot before the other, forced his breath to come even, forced his shoulders back and his head high, and swept imperiously past the guard, every part of his body singing with pain. What he saw beyond the doors almost broke his veneer of composure however.

Yesterday these were some of the finest rooms in the Agriont. They were reserved for the most honoured of guests, the most important of foreign dignitaries. Yesterday. A gaping hole was ripped out of one wall where the window should have been, the sky beyond blinding bright after the darkness of the stairwell. A section of the ceiling had collapsed, broken timbers and shreds of plaster hanging down into the room. The floor was strewn with chunks of stone, splinters of glass, torn fragments of coloured cloth. The antique furniture had been smashed to scattered pieces, broken edges charred and blackened as if by fire. Only one chair, half a table, and a tall ornamental jar, strangely pristine in the middle of the rubble-strewn floor, had escaped the destruction.

In the midst of this expensive wreckage stood a confused and sickly-seeming young man. He looked up as Glokta picked his way through the rubble round the doorway, tongue darting nervously over his lips, evidently on edge. *Has anyone ever looked more of a fraud?*

‘Er, good morning?’ The young man’s fingers twitched nervously at his gown, a heavy thing, stitched with arcane symbols. *And doesn’t he look uncomfortable in it? If this man is a wizard’s apprentice, I am the Emperor of Gurkhul.*

‘I am Glokta. From his Majesty’s Inquisition. I have been sent to investigate this . . . unfortunate business. I was expecting someone older.’

‘Oh, yes, sorry, I am Malacus Quai,’ stammered the young man, ‘apprentice

to great Bayaz, the First of the Magi, great in high art and learned in deep—'
Kneel, kneel before me! I am the mighty Emperor of Gurkhul!

'Malacus . . .' Glokta cut him off rudely ' . . . Quai. You are from the Old Empire?'

'Why yes,' the young man brightened slightly at that. 'Do you know my—'

'No. Not at all.' The pale face sagged. 'Were you here last night?'

'Er, yes, I was asleep, next door. I'm afraid I didn't see anything though . . .'
Glokta stared at him, intent and unblinking, trying to work him out. The apprentice coughed and looked at the floor, as if wondering what to clean up first. *Can this really make the Arch Lector nervous? A miserable actor. His whole manner reeks of deception.*

'Someone saw something, though?'

'Well, erm, Master Ninefingers, I suppose—'

'Ninefingers?'

'Yes, our Northern companion.' The young man brightened. 'A warrior of great renown, a champion, a prince among his—'

'You, from the Old Empire. He, a Northman. What a cosmopolitan band you are.'

'Well yes, ha ha, we do, I suppose—'

'Where is Ninefingers now?'

'Still asleep I think, er, I could wake him—'

'Would you be so kind?' Glokta tapped his cane on the floor. 'It was quite a climb, and I would rather not come back later.'

'No, er, of course . . . sorry.' He hastened over to one of the doors and Glokta turned away, pretending to examine the gaping wound in the wall while grimacing in agony and biting his lip to keep from wailing like a sick child. He seized hold of the broken stones at the edge of the hole with his free hand, squeezing them as hard as he could.

As the spasm passed he began to take more interest in the damage. Even this high up the wall was a good four feet thick, solidly built from rubble bonded with mortar, faced with cut stone blocks. It would take a rock from a truly mighty catapult to make such a breach, or a team of strong workmen going night and day for a week. *A giant siege engine or a group of labourers would doubtless have attracted the attention of the guards. So how was it made?* Glokta ran his hand over the cracked stones. He had once heard rumours that in the far south they made a kind of blasting powder. *Could a little powder have done this?*

The door opened and Glokta turned to see a big man ducking under the low lintel, buttoning his shirt with slow, heavy hands. A thoughtful kind of slowness. *As if he could move quickly but doesn't see the point.* His hair was a tangled mass, his lumpy face badly scarred. The middle finger of his left hand was missing. *Hence Ninefingers. How very imaginative.*

'Sleeping late?'

The Northman nodded. 'Your city is too hot for me – it keeps me up at night and makes me sleepy in the day.'

Glokta's leg was throbbing, his back was groaning, his neck was stiff as a dry branch. It was all he could do to keep his agony a secret. He would have given anything to sprawl in that one undamaged chair and scream his head

off. *But I must stand, and trade words with these charlatans.* ‘Could you explain to me what happened here?’

Ninefingers shrugged. ‘I needed to piss in the night. I saw someone in the room.’ He had little trouble with the common tongue, it seemed, even if the content was hardly polite.

‘Did you see who this someone was?’

‘No. It was a woman, I saw that much.’ He worked his shoulders, clearly uncomfortable.

‘A woman, really?’ *This story becomes more ridiculous by the second.* ‘Anything else? Can we narrow our search beyond half the population?’

‘It was cold. Very cold.’

‘Cold?’ *Of course, why not? On one of the hottest nights of the year.*

Glokta stared into the Northman’s eyes for a long time, and he stared back. Dark, cool blue eyes, deeply set. *Not the eyes of an idiot. He may look an ape, but he doesn’t talk like one. He thinks before he speaks, then says no more than he has to. This is a dangerous man.*

‘What is your business in the city, Master Ninefingers?’

‘I came with Bayaz. If you want to know his business you can ask him. Honestly, I don’t know.’

‘He pays you then?’

‘No.’

‘You follow him out of loyalty?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘But you are his servant?’

‘No. Not really.’ The Northman scratched slowly at his stubbly jaw. ‘I don’t know what I am.’

A big, ugly liar is what you are. But how to prove it? Glokta waved his cane around the shattered chamber. ‘How did your intruder cause so much damage?’

‘Bayaz did that.’

‘He did? How?’

‘Art, he calls it.’

‘Art?’

‘Base magic is wild and dangerous,’ intoned the apprentice pompously, as though he were saying something of great importance, ‘for it comes from the Other Side, and to touch the world below is fraught with peril. The Magus tempers magic with knowledge, and thus produces High Art, but like the smith or the—’

‘The Other Side?’ snapped Glokta, putting a sharp end to the young moron’s stream of drivel. ‘The world below? Hell, do you mean? Magic? Do you know any magic, Master Ninefingers?’

‘Me?’ The Northman chuckled. ‘No.’ He thought about it for a moment and then added, almost as an afterthought, ‘I can speak to the spirits though.’

‘The spirits, is that so?’ *For pity’s sake.* ‘Perhaps they could tell us who this intruder was?’

‘I’m afraid not.’ Ninefingers shook his head sadly, either missing Glokta’s sarcasm or choosing to ignore it. ‘There are none left awake in this place. They are sleeping here. They have been for a long time.’

'Ah, of course.' *Well past spirits' bedtime. I tire of this nonsense.* 'You come from Bethod?'

'You could say that.' It was Glokta who was surprised. He had expected at best a sharp intake of breath, a hurried effort at concealment, not a frank admission. Ninefingers did not even blink however. 'I was once his champion.'

'Champion?'

'I fought ten duels for him.'

Glokta groped for words. 'Did you win?'

'I was lucky.'

'You realise, of course, that Bethod has invaded the Union?'

'I do.' Ninefingers sighed. 'I should have killed that bastard long ago, but I was young then, and stupid. Now I doubt I'll get another chance, but that's the way of things. You have to be . . . what's the word for it?'

'Realistic,' said Quai.

Glokta frowned. A moment ago, he had teetered on the brink of making sense of all this nonsense, but the moment had slipped away and things made less sense than ever. He stared at Ninefingers, but that scarred face held no answers, only more questions. *Talking with spirits? Bethod's champion but his enemy? Assaulted by a mysterious woman in the dead of night? And he doesn't even know why he's here? A clever liar tells as much truth as he can, but this one tells so many lies I hardly know where to begin.*

'Ah, we have a guest!' An old man stepped into the room, thickset and stocky with a short grey beard, vigorously rubbing his bald head with a cloth. *So this is Bayaz.* He threw himself down in the one intact chair, moving with none of the grace one would expect from an important historical figure. 'I must apologise. I was taking advantage of the bath. A very fine bath. I have been bathing every day since we arrived here at the Agriont. I grew so besmirched with the dirt of the road that I have positively seized upon the opportunity to be clean again.' The old man rubbed his hand over his hairless scalp with a faint hissing sound.

Glokta mentally compared his features to those of Bayaz' statue in the Kingsway. *There is hardly anything uncanny about the resemblance. Half as commanding and a great deal shorter. Given an hour I could find five old men who looked more convincing. If I took a razor to Arch Lector Sult, I could do better.* Glokta glanced at his shiny pate. *I wonder if he takes a razor to that every morning?*

'And you are?' asked the supposed Bayaz.

'Inquisitor Glokta.'

'Ah, one of His Majesty's Inquisitors. We are honoured!'

'Oh no, the honour is mine. You, after all, are the legendary Bayaz, First of the Magi.'

The old man glared back at him, his green eyes prickly hard. 'Legendary is perhaps a shade too much, but I am Bayaz.'

'Your companion, Master Ninefingers, was just describing last night's events to me. A colourful tale. He claims that you caused . . . all this.'

The old man snorted. 'I am not in the habit of welcoming uninvited guests.'

'So I see.'

'Alas, there was some damage to the suite. In my experience one should act

quickly and decisively. The pieces can always be picked up afterward.'

'Of course. Forgive my ignorance, Master Bayaz, but how, precisely, was the damage caused?'

The old man smiled. 'You can understand that we do not share the secrets of our order with just anyone, and I am afraid that I already have an apprentice.' He indicated the unconvincing youth.

'We met. In simple terms then, perhaps, that I might understand?'

'You would call it magic.'

'Magic. I see.'

'Indeed. It is, after all, what we Magi are best known for.'

'Mmm. I don't suppose you would be kind enough to demonstrate, for my benefit?'

'Oh no!' The so-called wizard gave a comfortable laugh. 'I don't do tricks.'

This old fool is as hard to fathom as the Northman. The one barely speaks, while the other talks and talks but says nothing. 'I must admit to being somewhat at a loss as to how this intruder got in.' Glokta glanced round the room, examining the possible means of entrance. 'The guard saw nothing, which leaves the window.'

He shuffled cautiously to the hole and peered out. There had been a small balcony, but a few stubby splinters of stone were all that remained. Otherwise the wall fell smooth and sheer all the way to the glittering water far, far below. 'That's quite a climb to make, especially in a dress. An impossible one, wouldn't you say? How do you think this woman made it?'

The old man snorted. 'Do you want me to do your job for you? Perhaps she clambered up the latrine chute!' The Northman looked deeply troubled by that suggestion. 'Why don't you catch her and ask her? Isn't that what you're here for?'

Touchy, touchy, and consummately acted. An air of injured innocence so convincing, he almost has me believing this garbage. Almost, but not quite. 'Therein lies the problem. There is no sign of your mysterious intruder. No body has been recovered. Some wood, small pieces of furniture, the stones from the wall, they were scattered widely in the streets below. But nothing of any intruder, of either sex.'

The old man stared back at him, a hard frown beginning to form on his face. 'Perhaps the body burned to nothing. Perhaps it was torn apart, into pieces too small to see, or boiled away into the air. Magic is not always precise, or predictable, even in the hands of a master. Such things can happen. Easily. Particularly when I become annoyed.'

'I fear I must risk your annoyance, though. It has occurred to me that you might not, in fact, be Bayaz, the First of the Magi.'

'Indeed?' The old man's bushy eyebrows drew together.

'I must at least entertain the possibility . . .' a tense stillness had settled on the room ' . . . that you are an impostor.'

'A fraud?' snapped the so-called Magus. The pale young man lowered his head and backed quietly away towards the wall. Glokta felt suddenly very alone in the midst of that rubble strewn circle, alone and increasingly unsure of himself, but he soldiered on.

'It had occurred to me that this whole event might have been staged for our

benefit. A convenient demonstration of your magical powers.'

'Convenient?' Hissed the bald old man, his voice unnaturally loud. 'Convenient, say you? It would be convenient if I was left to enjoy a night's sleep uninterrupted. Convenient if I was now sitting in my old chair on the Closed Council. Convenient if people took my word as law, the way they used to, without asking a lot of damn fool questions!'

The resemblance to the statue on the Kingsway was suddenly much increased. There, now, was the frown of command, the sneer of contempt, the threat of terrible anger. The old man's words seemed to press on Glokta like a great weight, driving the breath from his body, threatening to crush him to his knees, cutting into his skull, and leaving behind a creeping shred of doubt. He glanced up at the yawning hole in the wall. *Powder? Catapults? Labourers? Is there not a simpler explanation?* The world seemed to shift around him, as it had in the Arch Lector's study a few days before, his mind turned the pieces, pulling them apart, putting them together. *What if they are simply telling the truth? What if . . .*

No! Glokta forced the idea from his mind. He lifted his head and gave the old man a sneer of his own to think about. *An aging actor with a shaved head and a plausible manner. Nothing more.* 'If you are as you say, you have nothing to fear from my questions, or from your answers.'

The old man cracked a smile and the strange pressure was suddenly released. 'Your candour at least, Inquisitor, is quite refreshing. No doubt you will do your utmost to prove your theory. I wish you luck. I, as you say, have nothing to fear. I would only ask that you find some proof of this deception before bothering us again.'

Glokta bowed stiffly. 'I will try to do so,' he said, and made for the door.

'There is one more thing!' The old man was looking towards the gaping hole in the wall. 'Would it be possible to find some other chambers? The wind blows rather chill through these.'

'I will look into it.'

'Good. Perhaps somewhere with fewer steps. Damn things play hell with my knees these days.' *Indeed? There, at least, we can agree.*

Glokta gave the three of them one last inspection. The bald old man stared back, his face a blank wall. The lanky youth glanced up anxiously then quickly turned away. The Northman was still frowning towards the latrine door. *Charlatans, impostors, spies. But how to prove it?* 'Good day, gentlemen.' And he limped towards the stairs with as much dignity as he could muster.

Nobility

Jeza! scraped the last fair hairs from the side of his jaw and washed the razor off in the bowl. Then he wiped it on the cloth, closed it and placed it carefully on the table, admiring the way the sunlight glinted on the mother-of-pearl handle.

He wiped his face, and then – his favourite part of the day – gazed at himself in the looking glass. It was a good one, newly imported from Visserine, a present from his father: an oval of bright, smooth glass in a frame of lavishly-carved dark wood. A fitting surround for such a handsome man as the one gazing happily back at him. Honestly, handsome hardly did him justice.

‘You’re quite the beauty aren’t you?’ Jeza! said to himself, smiling as he ran his fingers over the smooth skin of his jaw. And what a jaw it was. He had often been told it was his best feature, not that there was anything whatever wrong with the rest of him. He turned to the right, then to the left, the better to admire that magnificent chin. Not too heavy, not brutish, but not too light either, not womanly or weak. A man’s jaw, no doubt, with a slight cleft in the chin, speaking of strength and authority, but sensitive and thoughtful too. Had there ever been a jaw like it? Perhaps some king, or hero of legend, once had one almost as fine. It was a noble jaw, that much was clear. No commoner could ever have had a chin so grand.

It must have come from his mother’s side of the family, Jeza! supposed. His father had rather a weak chin. His brothers too, come to think of it. You had to feel a little sorry for them, he had got all the looks in his family.

‘And most of the talent too,’ he murmured happily to himself. He turned away from the mirror with some reluctance, striding into his living room, pulling his shirt on and buttoning it up the front. He had to look his best today. The thought gave him a little shiver of nerves, starting in his stomach, creeping up his windpipe, lodging in his throat.

By now, the gates would be open. A steady flood of people would be filing into the Agriont, taking their seats on the great wooden benches in the Square of Marshals. Thousands of them. Everyone who was anyone, and plenty more who weren’t. They were already gathering: shouting, jostling, excited, waiting for . . . him. Jeza! coughed and tried to push the thought from his mind. He had kept himself awake with it for half the night already.

He moved over to the table, where the breakfast tray was sitting. He picked up a sausage absently in his fingertips and took a bite off the end, chewing it without relish. He wrinkled his nose and tossed it back in the dish. He had no appetite this morning. He was just wiping his fingers on the cloth when he noticed something lying on the floor by the door, a slip of paper. He bent and picked it up, unfolded it. A single line, written in a neat, precise hand:

Meet me tonight, at the statue of

'Shit,' he murmured, disbelieving, reading the line over and over. He folded the paper shut, glancing nervously round the room. Jezal could only think of one 'A'. He had pushed her to the back of his mind the last couple of days, he had been spending every spare moment training. This brought it all back though, and no mistake.

'Shit!' He opened the paper and read the line again. Meet me tonight? He could not escape a slight flush of satisfaction at that, and it slowly became a very distinct glow of pleasure. His mouth curled into a gormless grin. Secret meetings in the darkness? His skin prickled with excitement at the prospect. But secrets have a way of coming to the surface, and what if her brother found out? That thought brought on a fresh rush of nerves. He took the slip of paper in both hands, ready to tear it in half, but at the last moment he folded it instead, and slipped it into his pocket.

As Jezal made his way down the tunnel he could already hear the crowd. A strange, echoing murmur, seeming to come out of the very stones. He had heard it before, of course, as a spectator at last year's Contest, but it hadn't made his skin sweat and his guts turn over then. Being part of the audience is a world away from being part of the show.

He slowed for a moment, then stopped, closing his eyes and leaning against the wall, the noise of the crowd rushing in his ears, trying to breathe deep and compose himself.

'Don't worry, I know just how you feel.' Jezal felt West's consoling hand on his shoulder. 'I nearly turned around and ran the first time, but it'll pass as soon as the steels are drawn, believe me.'

'Yes,' mumbled Jezal, 'of course.' He doubted that West knew exactly how he felt. The man might have been through a couple of Contests before, but Jezal thought it unlikely he had been considering a surreptitious meeting with his best friend's sister the same night. He wondered whether West would be quite so considerate if he knew the contents of the letter in Jezal's breast pocket. It did not seem likely.

'We'd better get moving. Wouldn't want them to start without us.'

'No.' Jezal took one last deep breath, opened his eyes and blew out hard. Then he pushed himself away from the wall and strode rapidly down the tunnel. He felt a sudden surge of panic – where were his steels? He cast about him desperately, then breathed a long sigh. They were in his hand.

There was quite a crowd in the hall at the far end: trainers, seconds, friends, family members and hangers-on. You could tell who the contestants were, though; the fifteen young men with steels clutched tightly in their hands. The sense of fear was palpable, and contagious. Everywhere Jezal looked he saw pale, nervous faces, sweaty foreheads, anxious eyes darting around. It wasn't helped by the noise of the crowd, ominously loud beyond the closed double doors at the far end of the room, swelling and subsiding like a stormy sea.

There was only one man there who didn't seem at all bothered by the occasion, leaning against the wall on his own with one foot up on the plaster and his head tipped back, staring down his nose at the assembly through

barely open eyes. Most of the contestants were lithe, stringy, athletic. He was anything but. A big, heavy man with hair shaved to dark stubble. He had a great thick neck and a doorstep of a jaw – the jaw of a commoner, Jezal rather thought, but a large and powerful commoner with a mean streak. Jezal might have taken him for someone's servant but that he had a pair of steels dangling loosely from one hand.

'Gorst,' West whispered in Jezal's ear.

'Huh. Looks more like a labourer than a swordsman to me.'

'Maybe, but looks can lie.' The sound of the crowd was slowly fading, and the nervy chatter within the room subsided along with it. West raised his eyebrows. 'The King's address,' he whispered.

'My friends! My countrymen! My fellow citizens of the Union!' came a ringing voice, clearly audible even through the heavy doors.

'Hoff,' snorted West. 'Even here he takes the King's place. Why doesn't he just put the crown on and have done with it?'

'One month ago today,' came the far-off bellow of the Lord Chamberlain, 'fellows of mine on the Closed Council put forward the question . . . should there be a Contest this year?' Boos and shouts of wild disapproval were heard from the crowd. 'A fair question!' cried Hoff, 'for we are at war! A deadly struggle in the North! The very liberties which we hold so dear, the very freedoms which make us the envy of the world, our very way of life, stand threatened by the savage!'

A clerk began making his way around the room, separating the contestants from their families, their trainers, their friends. 'Good luck,' said West, clapping Jezal on the shoulder, 'I'll see you out there.' Jezal's mouth was dry, and he could only nod.

'And these were brave men who asked the question!' Boomed out Hoff's voice from beyond the doors. 'Wise men! Patriots all! My stalwart colleagues on the Closed Council! I understood why they might think, there should be no Contest this year!' There was a long pause. 'But I said to them, no!'

An eruption of manic cheering. 'No! No!' screamed the crowd. Jezal was ushered into line along with the other contestants, two abreast, eight pairs. He fussed with his steels as the Lord Chamberlain droned on, though he'd checked them twenty times already.

'No, I said to them! Should we allow these barbarians, these animals of the frozen North, to tread upon our way of life?

Should we allow this beacon of freedom amidst the darkness of the world to be extinguished? No, I said to them! Our liberty is not for sale at any price! On this, my friends, my countrymen, my fellow citizens of the Union, on this you may depend . . . we will win this war!'

Another great ocean swell of approval. Jezal swallowed, glanced nervously around. Bremer dan Gorst was standing there beside him. The big bastard had the temerity to wink, grinning as if he hadn't a care in the world. 'Damn idiot,' whispered Jezal, but he took care that his lips didn't move.

'And so, my friends, and so,' came Hoff's final cries, 'what finer occasion could there be than when we stand upon the very brink of peril? To celebrate the skill, the strength, the prowess, of some of our nation's bravest sons! My fellow citizens, my countrymen of the Union, I give you your contestants!'

The doors were heaved open and the roar of the crowd beyond rushed into the hall and made the rafters ring: suddenly, deafeningly loud. The front pair of swordsmen began to stride out through the bright archway, then the next pair, then the next. Jezal was sure he would freeze, motionless and staring like a rabbit, but when his turn came his feet stepped off manfully next to Gorst's, the heels of his highly polished boots clicking across the tiled floor and through the high doorway.

The Square of Marshals was transformed. All around, great banks of seating had been erected, stretching back, and back, and up, and up on all sides, spilling over with a boiling multitude. The contestants filed down a deep valley between the towering stands towards the centre of this great arena, the beams, and struts, and tree-trunk supports like a shadowy forest on either side. Directly before them, seeming very far away, the fencing circle had been laid, a little ring of dry yellow grass in the midst of a sea of faces.

Down near the front Jezal could make out the features of the rich and noble. Dressed in their best, shading their eyes from the bright sun, on the whole fashionably disinterested in the spectacle before them. Further back, higher up, the figures became less distinct, the clothes less fine. The vast majority of the crowd were mere blobs and specks of colour, crammed in around the distant edge of the dizzying bowl, but the commoners made up for their distance with their excitement: cheering, shouting, standing up on their toes and waving their arms in the air. Above them, the tops of the very highest buildings around the square peered over, walls and roofs sticking up like islands in the ocean, the windows and parapets crammed with minuscule onlookers.

Jezal blinked at this great display of humanity. Part of him was aware that his mouth was hanging open, but too small a part to close it. Damn, he felt queasy. He knew he should have eaten something, but it was too late now. What if he puked, right here in front of half the world? He felt that surge of blind panic again. Where did he leave his steels? Where were they? In his hand. In his hand. The crowd roared, and sighed, and wailed, with a myriad of different voices.

The contestants began to move away from the circle. Not all of them would be fighting today, most would only watch. As though there was a need for extra spectators. They began to make their way towards the front rows, but Jezal was not going with them, more was the pity. He made for the enclosures where the contestants prepared to fight.

He flopped down heavily next to West, closed his eyes and wiped his sweaty forehead as the crowd cheered on. Everything was too bright, too loud, too overpowering. Marshal Varuz was nearby, leaning over the side of the enclosure to shout in someone's ear. Jezal stared across the arena at the occupants of the royal box opposite, hoping vainly for a distraction.

'His Majesty the King seems to be enjoying the proceedings,' whispered West in Jezal's ear.

'Mmm.' The King, in fact, appeared already to have fallen soundly asleep, his crown slipping off at an angle. Jezal wondered idly what would happen if it fell off.

Crown Prince Ladisla was there, fabulously dressed as always, beaming

around at the arena with an enormous smile as though everyone was there for him. His younger brother, Prince Raynault, could hardly have looked more different: plain and sober, frowning worriedly at his semi-conscious father. Their mother, the Queen, sat beside them, bolt upright with her chin in the air, studiously pretending that her august husband was wide awake, and that his crown was in no danger of dropping suddenly and painfully into her lap. Between her and Lord Hoff, Jezal's eye was caught by a young woman – very, very beautiful. She was even more expensively dressed than Ladisla, if that was possible, with a chain of huge diamonds round her neck, flashing bright in the sun.

'Who's the woman?' asked Jezal.

'Ah, the Princess Terez,' murmured West. 'The daughter of Grand Duke Orso, Lord of Talins. She's quite the celebrated beauty, and for once it seems that rumour doesn't exaggerate.'

'I thought nothing good ever came from Talins.'

'So I've heard, but I think she might be the exception, don't you?' Jezal was not entirely convinced. Spectacular, no doubt, but there was an icy proud look to her eye. 'I think the Queen has it in mind that she marry Prince Ladisla.' As Jezal watched, the Crown Prince leant across his mother to favour the Princess with some witless banter, then exploded into laughter at his own joke, slapping his knee with merriment. She gave a frosty little smile, radiating contempt even at this distance. Ladisla seemed not to notice though, and Jezal's attention was soon distracted. A tall man in a red coat was striding ponderously towards the circle. The referee.

'It's time,' murmured West.

The referee held up his arm with a theatrical flourish, two fingers extended, and turned slowly around, waiting for the hubbub to subside. 'Today you will have the pleasure of witnessing *two* bouts of fencing!' he thundered, then thrust up his other hand, three fingers out, as the audience applauded. 'Each the best of *three* touches!' He threw up both arms. '*Four* men will fight before you! Two of them will go home . . . empty handed.' The referee let one arm drop, shook his head sadly, the crowd sighed. 'But two will pass on to the next round!' The crowd bellowed their approval.

'Ready?' asked Marshal Varuz, leaning forwards over Jezal's shoulder.

What a damn fool question. What if he wasn't ready? What then? Call the whole thing off? Sorry everyone, I'm not ready? See you next year? But all Jezal could say was, 'Mmm.'

'The time has come!' cried the referee, turning slowly around in the centre of the arena, 'for our first bout!'

'Jacket!' snapped Varuz.

'Uh.' Jezal fumbled with the buttons and pulled his jacket off, rolling up his shirt-sleeves mechanically. He glanced sideways and saw his opponent making similar preparations. A tall, thin young man with long arms and weak, slightly dewy eyes. Hardly the most intimidating looking of adversaries. Jezal noticed his hands were trembling slightly as he took his steels from his second.

'Trained by Sepp dan Vissen, and hailing from Rostod, in Starikland . . .' the referee paused for the greatest effect ' . . . Kurtis dan Broyal' There was a wave of enthusiastic clapping. Jezal snorted. These clowns would clap for anyone.

The tall young man got up from his seat and walked purposefully towards the circle, his steels flashing in the sunlight. 'Broya!' repeated the referee, as the gangly idiot took his mark. West pulled Jezal's steels from their sheaths. The metallic ringing of the blades made him want to be sick again.

The referee pointed once more towards the contestant's enclosure. 'And his opponent today! An officer of the King's Own, and trained by none other than Lord Marshal Varuz!' There was scattered applause and the old soldier beamed happily. 'Hailing from Luthar in Midderland but resident here in the Agriont . . . Captain Jezal dan Luthar!' Another surge of cheering, far louder than Broya had received. There was a flurry of sharp cries above the din. Shouted numbers. Odds being offered. Jezal felt another rush of nausea as he got slowly to his feet.

'Good luck.' West handed Jezal his naked steels, hilts first.

'He doesn't need luck!' snapped Varuz. 'This Broya's a nobody! Just watch him reach! Press him, Jezal, press him!'

It seemed to take forever to reach that ring of short dry grass, the sound of the crowd loud in Jezal's ears but the sound of his heart louder still, turning the grips of his steels round and round in his sweaty palms. 'Luthar!' repeated the referee, smiling wide as he watched Jezal approach.

Pointless and irrelevant questions flitted in and out of his mind. Was Ardee watching, in the crowd, wondering whether he would come to meet her that night? Would he get killed in the war? How did they get the grass for the fencing circle into the Square of Marshals? He glanced up at Broya. Was he feeling the same way? The crowd was quiet now, very quiet. The weight of the silence pressed down on Jezal as he took his mark in the circle, pushed his feet into the dry earth. Broya shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, raised his steels. Jezal needed to piss. Needed to piss so badly. What if he pissed himself right now? A big dark stain spreading across his trousers. The man who pissed himself at the Contest. He would never live it down, not if he lived a hundred years.

'Begin!' thundered the referee.

But nothing happened. The two men stood there, facing each other, steels at the ready. Jezal's eyebrow itched. He wanted to scratch it, but how? His opponent licked his lips, then took a cautious step to his left. Jezal did the same. They circled each other warily, shoes crunching gently on the dry grass: slowly, slowly drawing closer together. And as they came closer, Jezal's world contracted to the space between the points of their long steels. Now it was only a stride. Now it was a foot. Now just six inches separated them. Jezal's whole mind was focused on those two glittering points. Three inches. Broya jabbed forward, weakly, and Jezal flicked it away without thinking.

The blades rang gently together and, as though that were a signal prearranged with every person in the arena, the shouting began again, scattered calls to begin with:

'Kill him, Luthar!'

'Yes!'

'Jab! Jab!'

But soon dissolving once more into the rumbling, angry sea of the crowd, rising and falling with the movements in the circle.

The more Jezal saw of this lanky idiot, the less daunted he became. His nerves began to subside. Broya jabbed, clumsy, and Jezal barely had to move. Broya cut, without conviction, and Jezal parried, without effort. Broya lunged, positively inept, off-balance and overextended. Jezal stepped around it and jabbed his opponent in the ribs with the blunt point of his long steel. It was all so very easy.

‘One for Luthar!’ cried the referee, and a surge of cheering ran around the stands. Jezal smiled to himself, basking in the appreciation of the crowd. Varuz had been right, this boob was nothing to worry about. One more touch and he’d be through to the next round.

He returned to his mark and Broya did the same, rubbing his ribs with one hand and staring at Jezal balefully from beneath his brows. Jezal was not intimidated. Angry looks are only any use if you can fight worth a damn.

‘Begin!’

They closed quickly this time, and exchanged a cut or two.

Jezal could hardly believe how slowly his opponent was moving. It was as if his swords weighed a ton each. Broya fished around in the air with his long steel, trying to use his reach to pin Jezal down. He had barely used his short steel yet, let alone coordinated the two. Worse still, he was starting to look out of breath, and they’d barely been fencing two minutes. Had he trained at all, this bumpkin? Or had they simply made up the numbers with some servant off the street? Jezal jumped away, danced around his opponent. Broya flapped after him, dogged but incompetent. It was starting to become embarrassing. Nobody enjoys a mismatch, and this dunce’s clumsiness was denying Jezal the opportunity to shine.

‘Oh come on!’ he shouted. A surge of laughter flowed around the stands. Broya gritted his teeth and came on with everything he had, but it wasn’t much. Jezal swatted his feeble efforts aside, dodged around them, flowed across the circle while his witless opponent lumbered after, always three steps behind. There was no precision, no speed, no thought. A few minutes before, Jezal had been half-terrified by the prospect of fencing with this gangling fool. Now he was almost bored.

‘Hah!’ he cried, switching suddenly onto the attack, catching his opponent off-balance with a savage cut, sending him stumbling back. The crowd came alive, roaring their support. He jabbed and jabbed again. Broya blocked desperately, all off-balance, reeled backwards, parried one last time then tripped, his arms flailing, short steel flying out of his hand, and pitched out of the circle onto his arse.

There was a wave of laughter, and Jezal could not help but join in. The poor dolt looked quite amusing, knocked on his back with his legs in the air like some sort of turtle.

‘Captain Luthar wins!’ roared the referee, ‘two to nothing!’ The laughter turned to jeering as Broya rolled over. He looked on the verge of tears, the oaf. Jezal stepped forwards and offered his hand, but found himself unable to entirely wipe the smirk off his face. His beaten adversary pointedly ignored his help, pushing himself up from the ground and giving him a look half hating, half hurt.

Jezal shrugged pleasantly. ‘It’s not my fault you’re shit.’

'More?' asked Kaspas, holding out the bottle in a wobbly hand, eyes misted over with too much booze.

'No thanks.' Jezal pushed the bottle gently away before Kaspas had the chance to pour. He looked blearily bewildered for a moment, then he turned to Jalenhorm.

'More?'

'Always.' The big man slid his glass across the rough table top in a way that said, 'I am not drunk', though he clearly was. Kaspas lowered the bottle towards it, squinting at the glass as though it was a great distance away. Jezal watched the neck of the bottle wobbling in the air, then rattling on the edge of the glass. The inevitability of it was almost painful to behold. Wine spilled out across the table, splashing into Jalenhorm's lap.

'You're drunk!' complained the big man, staggering to his feet and brushing at himself with big, drunken hands, knocking his stool over in the process. A few of the other patrons eyed their table with evident disdain.

'Always,' giggled Kaspas.

West looked up briefly from his glass. 'You're both drunk.'

'Not our fault.' Jalenhorm groped for his stool. 'It's him!' He pointed an unsteady finger at Jezal.

'He won!' gurgled Kaspas. 'You won, didn't you, and now we got to celebrate!'

Jezal wished they didn't have to celebrate quite so much. It was becoming embarrassing.

'My cousin Ariss was there – saw whole thing. She was ver' impressed.' Kaspas flung his arm round Jezal's shoulder. 'Think she's quite smitten with you . . . smitten . . . smitten.' He worked his wet lips in Jezal's face, trying to get his mouth round the word. 'She's ver' rich you know, ver' rich indeed. Smitten.'

Jezal wrinkled his nose. He had not the slightest interest in that ghostly simpleton of a cousin, however rich she was, and Kaspas's breath stank. 'Good . . . lovely.' He disentangled himself from the Lieutenant and shoved him away, none too gently.

'So, when are we starting on this business in the North?' demanded Brint, a little too loud, as though he for one couldn't wait to get underway. 'Soon I hope, home before winter, eh, Major?'

'Huh,' snorted West, frowning to himself, 'we'll be lucky to have left before winter, the rate we're going.'

Brint looked a little taken aback. 'Well, I'm sure we'll give these savages a thrashing, whenever we get there.'

'Give 'em a thrashing!' cried Kaspas.

'Aye.' Jalenhorm nodded his agreement.

West was not in the mood. 'I wouldn't be too sure about that. Have you seen the state of some of these levies? They can hardly walk, let alone fight. It's a disgrace.'

Jalenhorm dismissed all this with an angry wave of his hand. 'They're nothing but fucking savages, the lot of 'em! We'll knock 'em on their arses, like Jezal did that idiot today, eh, Jezal? Home before winter, everyone says so!'

'Do you know the land up there?' asked West, leaning across the table. 'Forests, mountains, rivers, on and on. Precious little open space to fight in, precious few roads to march on. You've got to catch a man before the thrashing can start. Home before winter? Next winter, maybe, if we come back at all.'

Brint's eyes were wide open and horrified. 'You can't mean that!'

'No . . . no, you're right.' West sighed and shook himself. 'I'm sure it'll all turn out fine. Glory and promotions all round. Home before winter. I'd take a coat with you though, just in case.'

An uneasy silence descended on the group. West had that hard frown on his face that he got sometimes, the frown that said they'd get no more fun out of him tonight. Brint and Jalenhorm looked puzzled and surly. Only Kasper maintained his good humour, and he was lolling back in his chair, eyes half closed, blissfully unaware of his surroundings.

Some celebration.

Jezal himself felt tired, annoyed, and worried. Worried about the Contest, worried about the war . . . worried about Ardee. The letter was still there, folded up in his pocket. He glanced sidelong at West, then quickly away. Damn, he felt guilty. He had never really felt guilty before, and he didn't like it one bit. If he didn't meet her, he would feel guilty for leaving her on her own. If he did, he'd feel guilty for breaking his word to West. It was a dilemma alright. Jezal chewed at his thumb-nail. What the hell was it about this damn family?

'Well,' said West sharply, 'I have to be going. Early start tomorrow.'

'Mmm,' muttered Brint.

'Right,' said Jalenhorm.

West looked Jezal right in the eye. 'Can I have a word?' His expression was serious, grave, angry even. Jezal's heart lurched. What if West had found out about the letter? What if Ardee had told him? The Major turned away, moved over towards a quiet corner. Jezal stared around, desperately seeking for some way out.

'Jezal!' called West.

'Yes, yes.' He got up with the greatest reluctance and followed his friend, flashing what he hoped was an innocent-seeming smile. Perhaps it was something else. Nothing to do with Ardee. Please let it be something else.

'I don't want anyone else to know about this . . . ' West looked round to make sure no one was watching. Jezal swallowed. Any moment now he would get a punch in the face. At least one. He had never been punched in the face, not properly. A girl slapped him pretty hard once, but that was hardly the same. He prepared himself as best he could, gritting his teeth, wincing slightly. 'Burr has set a date. We've got four weeks.'

Jezal stared back. 'What?'

'Until we embark.'

'Embark?'

'For Angland, Jezal!'

'Oh, yes . . . Angland, of course! Four weeks you say?'

'I thought you ought to know, since you're busy with the Contest, so you'd have time to get ready. Keep it to yourself, though.'

'Yes, of course.' Jezal wiped his sweaty forehead.

'You alright? You look pale.'

'I'm fine, fine.' He took a deep breath. 'All this excitement, you know, the fencing and . . . everything.'

'Don't worry, you did well today.' West clapped him on the shoulder. 'But there's a lot more to do. Three more bouts before you can call yourself a champion, and they'll only get harder. Don't get lazy, Jezal – and don't get too drunk!' he threw over his shoulder as he made for the door. Jezal breathed a long sigh of relief as he returned to the table where the others were sitting. His nose was still intact.

Brint had already started to complain, now he could see that West wasn't coming back. 'What the hell was all that?' he asked, frowning and jabbing his thumb at the door. 'I mean to say, well, I know he's supposed to be the big hero and all of that but, well, I mean to say!'

Jezal stared down at him. 'What do you mean to say?'

'Well, to talk that way! It's, it's defeatist!' The drink was lending him courage now, and he was warming to his topic. 'It's . . . well, I mean to say . . . it's cowardly talk is what it is!'

'Now, look here, Brint,' snapped Jezal, 'he fought in three pitched battles, and he was first through the breach at Ulrioch! He may not be a nobleman, but he's a damn courageous fellow! Added to that he knows soldiering, he knows Marshal Burr, and he knows Angland! What do you know, Brint?' Jezal curled his lip. 'Except how to lose at cards and empty a wine bottle?'

'That's all a man needs to know in my book,' laughed Jalenhorm nervously, doing his best to calm the situation. 'More wine!' he bellowed at no one in particular.

Jezal dropped down on his stool. If the company had been subdued before West left, it was even more so now. Brint was sulking. Jalenhorm was swaying on his stool. Kasper had fallen soundly asleep, sprawled out on the wet table top, his breathing making quiet slurping sounds.

Jezal drained his wine glass, and stared round at the unpromising faces. Damn, he was bored. It was a fact, he was only now beginning to realise, that the conversation of the drunk is only interesting to the drunk. A few glasses of wine can be the difference between finding a man a hilarious companion or an insufferable moron. He wondered if he himself was as tedious drunk as Kasper, or Jalenhorm, or Brint.

Jezal gave a thin smile as he looked over at the sulking bastard. If he were King, he mused, he would punish poor conversation with death, or at least a lengthy prison term. He stood up from his chair.

Jalenhorm stared up at him. 'What you doing?'

'Better get some rest,' snapped Jezal, 'need to train tomorrow.' It was the most he could do not to just run out of the place.

'But you won! Ain't you going to celebrate?'

'First round. I've still three more men to beat, and they'll all be better than that oaf today.' Jezal took his coat from the back of the chair and pulled it over his shoulders.

'Suit self,' said Jalenhorm, then slurped noisily from his glass.

Kasper raised his head from the table for a moment, hair on one side

plastered to his skull with spilled wine. 'Going sho shoon?'

'Mmm,' said Jezal as he turned and stalked out.

There was a cold wind blowing in the street outside. It made him feel even more sober than before. Painfully sober. He badly needed some intelligent company, but where could he find it at this time of night? There was only one place he could think of.

He slipped the letter out of his pocket and read it in the dim light from the tavern's windows, just one more time. If he hurried he might still catch her. He began to walk slowly towards the Four Corners. Just to talk, that was all. He needed someone to talk to . . .

No. He forced himself to stop. Could he truly pretend that he wanted to be her friend? A friendship between a man and a woman was what you called it when one had been pursuing the other for a long time, and had never got anywhere. He had no interest in that arrangement.

What then? Marriage? To a girl with no blood and no money? Unthinkable! He imagined bringing Ardee home to meet his family. Here is my new wife, father! Wife? And her connections are? He shuddered at the thought.

But what if they could find something in between, where everyone would be comfortable? His feet began slowly to move. Not friendship, not marriage, but some looser arrangement? He strode down the road towards the Four Corners. They could meet discreetly, and talk, and laugh, somewhere with a bed maybe . . .

No. No. Jezal stopped again and slapped the side of his head in frustration. He couldn't let that happen, even supposing she would. West was one thing, but what if other people found out? It wouldn't hurt his reputation any, of course, but hers would be ruined. Ruined. His flesh crept at the thought. She didn't deserve that, surely. It wasn't good enough to say it was her problem. Not good enough. Just so he could have a little fun? The selfishness of it. He was amazed that it had never occurred to him before.

So he had reasoned himself into a corner then, just as he had done ten times already today: nothing good could come from seeing her. They would be away to war soon anyway, and that would put an end to his ridiculous pining. Home to bed then, and train all day tomorrow. Train and train until Marshal Varuz had battered her out of his thoughts. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, turned and set off towards the Agriont.

The statue of Harod the Great loomed out of the darkness on a marble plinth almost as tall as Jezal, seeming far too big and grand for its quiet little square near the Four Corners. He had been jumping at shadows all the way here, avoiding people, doing his best to be inconspicuous. There weren't many people around though. It was late, and most likely Ardee would have given up waiting a long time ago, provided she was even there to begin with.

He crept nervously around the statue, peering into the shadows, feeling an absolute fool. He had walked through this square many times before and never given it a second thought. Was it not a public space after all? He had as much right as anyone to be here, but somehow he still felt like a thief.

The square was empty. That was a good thing. All for the best. There was nothing to gain, everything to lose, and so forth. So why did he feel so completely crushed? He stared up at Harod's face, locked into that stony

frown that sculptors reserve for the truly great. He had a fine, strong jaw, did Harod, almost the equal of Jezal's own.

'Wake up!' hissed a voice by his ear. Jezal let vent to a girlish squeal, scrambled away, tripped, only stayed upright by clawing at King Harod's enormous foot. There was a dark figure behind him, a hooded figure.

Laughter. 'No need to piss yourself.' Ardee. She pushed back her hood. Light from a window slanted across the bottom part of her face, catching her lopsided smile. 'It's only me.'

'I didn't see you,' he mumbled pointlessly, quickly releasing his desperate grip on the huge stone foot and doing his best to appear at ease. He had to admit it was a poor start. He had no talent for this cloak-and-dagger business. Ardee seemed quite comfortable, though. It made him wonder whether she hadn't done it all before.

'You've been pretty hard to see yourself, lately,' she said.

'Well, er,' he muttered, heart still thumping from the shock, 'I've been busy, what with the Contest and all . . .'

'Ah, the all-important Contest. I saw you fight today.'

'You did?'

'Very impressive.'

'Er, thank you, I—'

'My brother said something, didn't he?'

'What, about fencing?'

'No, numbskull. About me.'

Jezal paused, trying to work out the best way to answer that one. 'Well he —'

'Are you scared of him?'

'No!' Silence. 'Alright, yes.'

'But you came anyway. I suppose I should be flattered.' She walked slowly around him, looking him up and down, from feet to forehead and back again. 'You took your time, though. It's late. I'll have to be getting home soon.'

There was something about the way she was looking at him which was not helping to calm his thumping heart. Quite the opposite. He had to tell her that he could not see her any more. It was the wrong thing to do. For both of them. Nothing good could come from it . . . nothing good . . .

He was breathing quick, tense, excited, unable to take his eyes away from her shadowy face. He had to tell her, now. Wasn't that why he came? He opened his mouth to speak, but the arguments all seemed a long way away now, applying at a different time and to different people, intangible and weightless.

'Ardee . . .' he began.

'Mmm?' She stepped towards him, head cocked on one side. Jezal tried to move away, but the statue was at his back. She came closer still, lips slightly parted, her eyes fixed on his mouth. What was so wrong in it, anyway?

Closer still, her face turned up towards his. He could smell her – his head was full of the scent of her. He could feel her warm breath on his cheek. What could be wrong with this?

Her fingertips were cold against his skin, brushing the side of his face, tracing the line of his jaw, curling through his hair and pulling his head down

towards her. Her lips touched his cheek, soft and warm, then his chin, then his mouth. They sucked gently at his. She pressed herself up against him, her other hand slipped round his back. Her tongue lapped at his gums, at his teeth, at his tongue, and she made little sounds in her throat. So did he, perhaps – he really wasn't sure. His whole body was tingling, hot and cold at once, his mind was in his mouth. It was as if he'd never kissed a girl before. What could be wrong with this? Her teeth nipped at his lips, almost painful, but not quite.

He opened his eyes: breathless, trembling, weak at the knees. She was looking up at him. He could see her eyes gleaming in the darkness, watching him carefully, studying him.

'Ardee . . .'

'What?'

'When can I see you again?' His throat was dry, his voice sounded hoarse. She looked down at the ground with a little smile. A cruel smile, as though she'd called his bluff and won a pile of money from him. He didn't care. 'When?'

'Oh, I'll let you know.'

He had to kiss her again. Shit on the consequences. Fuck West. Damn it all. He bent down towards her, closed his eyes.

'No, no, no.' She pushed his mouth away from hers. 'You should have come sooner.' She broke away from him and turned around, with the smile still on her lips, and walked slowly away. He watched her, silent, frozen, fascinated, his back against the cold stone base of the statue. He had never felt like this before. Not ever.

She glanced back, just once, as if to check that he was still watching. His chest constricted, almost painfully, just to see her look at him, then she rounded a corner and was gone.

He stood there for a moment, his eyes wide open, just breathing. Then a cold gust of wind blew through the square and the world pressed back in upon him. Fencing, the war, his friend West, his obligations. One kiss, that was all. One kiss, and his resolve had leaked away like piss from a broken chamber pot. He stared around, suddenly guilty, confused, and scared. What had he done here?

'Shit,' he said.

Dark Work

A burning thing can make all kind of smells. A live tree, fresh and sappy, smells different ablaze to a dead one, dry and withered. A pig alight and a man smell much the same, but there's another story. This burning that the Dogman smelled now, that was a house. He knew it, sure as sure. A smell he knew better than he'd have liked. Houses don't burn on their own too often. Usually there's some violence in it. That meant men around, most likely, and ready for a fight, so he crept right careful down between the trees, slid on his belly to the edge, and peered out through the brush.

He saw it now, right enough. Black smoke in a tall pillar, rising up from a spot down near the river. A small house, still smoking, but burned down to the low stone walls. There'd been a barn too, but nothing more now than a pile of black sticks and black dirt. A couple of trees and a patch of tilled earth. It was a poor enough living at the best of times, farming this far north. Too cold to grow much – a few roots maybe, and some sheep to herd. A pig or two, if you were lucky.

Dogman shook his head. Who'd want to burn out folks as poor as this? Who'd want to steal this stubborn patch of land? Some men just like to burn, he reckoned. He eased out a touch further, looking right and left down the valley for some sign of the ones as did this, but a few stringy sheep spread out across the valley sides was all he could see moving. He wriggled back into the brush.

His heart sank as he sneaked back towards the camp. Voices raised, and arguing, as ever. He wondered for a minute whether to just go past and keep on going, he was that sick of the endless bickering. He decided against it in the end, though. It ain't much of a scout who leaves his people behind.

'Why don't you shut your hole, Dow?' Tul Duru's rumbling voice. 'You wanted south, and when we went south all you did was moan about the mountains! Now we're out o' the mountains you grumble on your empty belly all day and all night! I've had my fill of it, you whining dog!'

Now came Black Dow's nasty growl. 'Why should you get twice as much to eat, just 'cause you're a great fat pig?'

'You little bastard! I'll crush you like the worm y'are!'

'I'll cut your neck while you sleep you great pile o' meat! Then we'll all have plenty to eat! At least we'd all be rid of your fucking snoring! I know now why they named you Thunderhead, you rumbling sow!'

'Shut your holes the pair of you!' Dogman heard Threetrees roaring, loud enough to wake the dead. 'I'm sick of it!'

He could see them now, the five of them. Tul Duru and Black Dow, bristling up to one another, Threetrees in between them with his hands up, Forley sat watching, just looking sad, and Grim, not even watching, checking his shafts.

'Oy!' hissed Dogman, and they all snapped round to look at him.

‘It’s the Dogman,’ said Grim, barely looking up from his arrows. There was no understanding that man. He spoke nothing at all for days on end, then when he did speak it was to say what they could all see already.

Forley was keen to distract the lads, as always. It was a hard guess how long they’d keep from killing each other without him around. ‘What did you find, Dogman?’ he asked.

‘What do you know, I found five stupid fucking bastards out in the woods!’ he hissed, stepping out from the trees. ‘I could hear them from a mile away! And they were Named Men these, would you believe, men who should have known better! Fighting among themselves as always! Five stupid bastards—’

Threetrees raised his hand. ‘Alright, Dogman. We should know better.’ And he glowered at Tul and Dow. They glowered at each other, but they said nothing more. ‘What did you find?’

‘There’s fighting going on hereabouts, or something like it. I seen a farm burning.’

‘Burning, say you?’ asked Tul.

‘Aye.’

Threetrees frowned. ‘Take us to it, then.’



The Dogman hadn’t seen this from up in the trees. Couldn’t have. Too smoky and too far to see this. He saw it now though, right up close, and it made him sick. They all saw it.

‘This is some dark work here alright,’ said Forley, looking up at the tree. ‘Some dark work.’

‘Aye,’ mumbled Dogman. He couldn’t think of ought else to say. The branch creaked as the old man swung slowly round, his bare feet dangling near the earth. Might have been he tried to fight, he’d got two arrows through him. The woman was too young to be his wife. His daughter, maybe. The Dogman guessed the two young ones were her children. ‘Who’d hang a child?’ he muttered.

‘I can think of some black enough,’ said Tul.

Dow spat on the grass. ‘Meaning me?’ he growled, and the two of ’em were off again like hammer on anvil. ‘I burned some farms, and a village or two an’ all, but there were reasons, that was war. I let the children live.’

‘I heard different,’ said Tul. Dogman closed his eyes and sighed.

‘You think I give a dog’s arse for what you heard?’ Dow barked. ‘Might be my name’s blacker than I deserve, you giant shit!’

‘I know what you deserve, you bastard!’

‘Enough!’ growled Threetrees, frowning up at the tree. ‘Have you no respect? The Dogman’s right. We’re out of the mountains now and there’s trouble brewing. There’ll be no more of this squabbling. No more. Quiet and cold from now on, like the winter-time. We’re Named Men with men’s work to do.’

Dogman nodded, happy to hear some sense at last. ‘There’s fighting nearby,’ he said, ‘there has to be.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim, though it was hard to say exactly what he was agreeing with.

Threetrees’ eye was still fixed on the swinging bodies. ‘You’re right. We need to put our minds on that now. On that and nothing else. We’ll track the crowd as did this and see what they’re fighting for. We’ll do no good until we know who’s fighting who.’

‘Whoever did this fights for Bethod,’ said Dow. ‘You can tell just by the looking.’

‘We’ll see. Tul and Dow, cut these folks down and bury ’em. Maybe that task’ll put some steel back in you.’ The two of them scowled at each other, but Threetrees paid ’em no mind. ‘Dogman, you go and sniff out those as did this. Sniff ’em out, and we’ll pay ’em a visit tonight. A visit like they paid to these folks here.’

‘Aye,’ said Dogman, keen to get on and do it. ‘We’ll pay ’em a visit.’

The Dogman couldn’t work it out. If they were in a fight these lot, afraid of being caught out by an enemy, they weren’t making too much of an effort to cover their tracks. He followed them simple as could be, five of them he reckoned. Must’ve strolled nice and easy away from the burning farm, down through the valley beside the river and off into the woods. The tracks were so clear he got a little worried time to time, thinking they must be playing some trick on him, watching out there in the trees, waiting to hang him from a branch. Seemed they weren’t though, ’cause he caught up to them just before nightfall.

First of all he smelled their meat – mutton roasting. Next he heard their voices – talking, shouting, laughing, making not the meanest attempt to stay quiet, easy to hear even with the river bubbling beside. Then he saw them, sitting round a great big fire in a clearing, a sheep’s carcass skinned on a spit above it, taken from those farmers no doubt. The Dogman crouched down in the bushes, nice and still like they should have been. He counted five men, or four and a boy about fourteen years. They were all just sitting, no one standing guard, no caution at all. He couldn’t work it out.

‘They’re just sitting there,’ he whispered when he got back to the others. ‘Just sitting. No guard, no nothing.’

‘Just sitting?’ asked Forley.

‘Aye. Five of ’em. Sitting and laughing. I don’t like it.’

‘I don’t like it neither,’ said Threetrees, ‘but I like what I saw at that farm still less.’

‘Weapons,’ hissed Dow. ‘Weapons, it has to be.’

For once, Tul agreed with him. ‘Weapons, chief. Let’s give ’em a lesson.’

Not even Forley spoke up for staying out of a fight this time, but Threetrees thought it out for a bit still, taking his moment, not to be hurried. Then he nodded. ‘Weapons it is.’



You won’t see Black Dow in the dark, not if he don’t want to be seen. You

won't hear him neither, but the Dogman knew he was there as he crept down through the trees. You fight with a man for long enough, you get an understanding. You learn how he thinks and you come to think the same way. Dow was there.

The Dogman had his task. He could see the outline of the one on the far right, his back a black shape against the fire. Dogman didn't spare too much thought for the others yet. He spared no thought for anything but his task. Once you choose to go, or your chief chooses for you, you go all the way, and never look back 'til the task's done. The time you spend thinking is the time you'll get killed in. Logen taught him that and he'd taken it right to heart. That's the way it has to be.

Dogman crept closer, and closer still, feeling the warmth of the fire on his face, feeling the hard metal of the knife in his hand. By the dead he needed to piss, as always. The task wasn't but a stride away now. The boy was facing him – if he'd have looked up fast from his meat he'd have seen the Dogman coming, but he was too busy eating.

'Gurgh!' shouted one of the others. That meant Dow'd got to him, and that meant he was finished. Dogman leaped forward and stabbed his task in the side of the neck. He reared up for a moment, clutching at his cut throat, took a stumble forward and fell over. One of the others jumped up, dropping his half-chewed leg of mutton on the ground, then an arrow stuck him through the chest. Grim, out by the river. He looked surprised a minute, then he sank down on his knees, face twisted up with pain.

That left but two, and the boy was still sitting there, staring at the Dogman, mouth half open with a bit of meat hanging out of it. The last of them was stood up, breathing quick, with a long knife in his hand. He must have had it out for eating with.

'Drop the blade!' bellowed Threetrees. The Dogman saw the old boy now, striding towards them, the firelight catching the metal rim of his big round shield. The man chewed on his lip, eyes flicking from Dogman to Dow as they moved slowly to either side of him. Now he saw the Thunderhead, looming out of the darkness in the trees, seeming too big to be a man, his great huge sword glinting over his shoulder. That was enough for him. He threw his knife down in the dirt.

Dow jumped forward, grabbed his wrists and tied them tight behind him, then shoved him down on his knees beside the fire. The Dogman did the same with the boy, his teeth clenched tight, not saying a word. The whole thing was done in an instant, quiet and cold like Threetrees said. There was blood on Dogman's hands, but that was the work and couldn't be helped. The others were making their way over now. Grim came sloshing through the river, throwing his bow across his shoulder. He gave the one he shot a kick as he came past, but the body didn't move.

'Dead,' said Grim. Forley was at the back, peering at the two prisoners. Dow was staring at the one he'd tied, staring at him hard.

'I know this one 'ere,' he said, sounding quite pleased about it too. 'Groa the Mire, ain't it? What a chance! You've been gnawing at the back of my mind for some time.'

The Mire scowled down at the ground. A cruel-looking sort, the Dogman

thought, the type that might hang farmers, if there was one. 'Aye, I'm the Mire. No need to ask your names! When they find you've killed some o' the King's collectors you'll be dead men all!'

'Black Dow, they call me.'

The Mire's head came up, his mouth wide open. 'Oh fuck,' he whispered.

The boy kneeling next to him stared round with big eyes. 'Black Dow? You what? Not the same Black Dow as . . . oh fuck.'

Dow nodded slowly, with that nasty smile spreading across his face, that killing smile. 'Groa the Mire. You've all kind of work to pay for. I've had you in my mind, and now you're in my eye.' He patted him on the cheek. 'And in my hand too. What a happy chance.'

The Mire snatched his face away, as far as he could, trussed up like he was. 'I thought you were in hell, Black Dow, you bastard!'

'So did I, but I was only north o' the mountains. We've questions for you, Mire, before you get what's due. Who's this king? What is it you're collecting for him?'

'Fuck your questions!'

Threetrees hit him on the side of his head, hard, where he couldn't see it coming. When he turned round to look, Dow cracked him on the other side. Back and forth his head went, till he was soft enough to talk.

'What's the fight?' asked Threetrees.

'We ain't fighting!' spat the Mire through his broken teeth. 'You might as well be dead, you bastards! You don't know what's happened, do yer?' Dogman frowned. He didn't like the sound of this. Sounded like things had changed while they were gone, and he'd never yet seen a change for the better.

'I'll do the questions here,' said Threetrees. 'You just keep your tiny mind on the answers to 'em. Who's still fighting? Who won't kneel to Bethod?'

The Mire laughed, even tied up like he was. 'There's no one left! The fighting's over! Bethod's King now. King of all the North! Everyone kneels to him—'

'Not us,' rumbled Tul Duru, leaning down. 'What about Old Man Yawl?'

'Dead!'

'What about Sything, or Rattleneck?'

'Dead and dead, you stupid fucks! The only fighting now's down south! Bethod's gone to war with the Union! Aye! And we're giving 'em a beating too!'

The Dogman wasn't sure whether to believe it. King? There'd never been a king in the North before. There'd never been a need for one, and Bethod was the last one he'd have chosen. And making war on the Union? That was a fool's errand, surely. There were always more southerners.

'If there's no fighting here,' asked the Dogman, 'what you killing for?'

'Fuck yourself!'

Tul slapped him in the face, hard, and he fell on his back. Dow put in a kick of his own, then dragged him up straight again.

'What did you kill 'em for?' asked Tul.

'Taxes!' shouted the Mire, with blood trickling out of his nose.

'Taxes?' asked the Dogman. A strange word alright, he barely knew the

meaning of it.

'They wouldn't pay!'

'Taxes for who?' asked Dow.

'For Bethod, who do you think? He took all this land, broke the clans up and took it for his own! The people owe him! And we collect!'

'Taxes, eh? That's a fucking southern fashion and no mistake!

And if they can't pay?' asked Dogman, feeling sick to his guts. 'You hang 'em, do you?'

'If they won't pay we can do as we please with 'em!'

'As you please?' Tul grabbed him round the neck, squeezing with his great big hand 'til the Mire's eyes were half popping out. 'As you please? Does it please you to hang 'em?'

'Alright, Thunderhead,' said Dow, peeling Tul's big fingers away, and pushing him gently back. 'Alright, big lad, this ain't for you, to kill a man tied up.' And he patted him on the chest, pulling out his axe. 'It's for work like this you bring along a man like me.'

The Mire had more or less got over his throttling now. 'Thunderhead?' he coughed, looking round at them. 'It's the whole lot of you, ain't it! You're Threetrees, and Grim, and that's the Weakest there! So you don't kneel, eh? Good for fuckin' you! Where's Ninefingers? Eh?' jeered the Mire. 'Where's the Bloody-Nine?'

Dow turned round, running his thumb down the edge of his axe. 'Gone back to the mud, and you're joining him. We've heard enough.'

'Let me up, bastard!' shouted the Mire, struggling at his ropes. 'You're no better'n me, Black Dow! You've killed more folk than the plague! Let me up and give me a blade! Come on! You scared to fight me, you coward? Scared to give a fair chance are yer?'

'Call me coward, would you?' growled Dow. 'You who's killed children for the sport of it? You had a blade and you let it drop. That was your chance and you should have took it. The likes o' you don't deserve another. If you've anything to say worth hearing you best say it now.'

'Shit on yer!' screamed the Mire, 'Shit on the pack of—'

Dow's axe cracked him hard between the eyes and knocked him on his back. He kicked a little then that was it. Not a one of them shed too big a tear for that bastard – even Forley gave no more than a wince when the blade went in. Dow leaned over and spat on his corpse, and the Dogman hardly blamed him. The boy was something more of a problem, though. He stared down at the body with big, wide eyes, then he looked up.

'You're them, ain't ya,' he said, 'them as Ninefingers beat.'

'Aye, boy,' said Threetrees, 'we're them.'

'I heard stories, stories about you. What you going to do with me?'

'Well, there's the question, ain't it,' Dogman muttered to himself. Shame was, he already knew the answer.

'He can't stay with us,' said Threetrees. 'We can't take the baggage and we can't take the risk.'

'He's just a lad,' said Forley. 'We could let him go.' It was a nice thought, but it wasn't holding much water, and they all knew it. The boy looked hopeful, but Tul put an end to that.

'We can't trust him. Not here. He'd tell someone we were back, and then we'd be hunted. Can't do it. Besides, he had his part in that work at the farm.'

'But what choice did I 'ave?' asked the boy. 'What choice? I wanted to go south! Go south and fight the Union, and earn myself a name, but they sent me here, to get taxes. My chief says do a thing, I got to do it, don't I?'

'You do,' said Threetrees. 'No one says you could've done different.'

'I didn't want no part of it! I told him to let the young ones be! You got to believe me!'

Forley looked down at his boots. 'We do believe you.'

'But you're going to fuckin' kill me anyway?'

Dogman chewed at his lip. 'Can't take you with us, can't leave you be.'

'I didn't want no part of it.' The boy hung his head. 'Don't hardly seem fair.'

'It ain't,' said Threetrees. 'It ain't fair at all. But there it is.'

Dow's axe hacked into the back of the lad's skull and he sprawled out on his face. The Dogman winced and looked away. He knew Dow did it that way so they wouldn't have to look at the boy's face. A good idea most likely, and he hoped it helped the others, but face up or face down was all the same to him. He felt almost as sick as he had back at the farm.

It wasn't the worst day he'd ever had, not by a long way. But it was a bad one.

The Dogman watched 'em filing down the road from a good spot up in the trees where no one could see him. He made sure it was downwind from 'em too, cause being honest, he was smelling a bit ripe. It was a strange old procession. On the one hand they looked like fighting men, off to a weapon-take and then to battle. On the other hand they were all wrong. Old weapons mostly, and odds and sods of mixed up armour. Marching, but loose and ragged. Most of 'em too old to be prime fighters, grey hair and bald heads, and a lot of the rest too young for beards, hardly more than boys.

Seemed to the Dogman like nothing made sense in the North no more. He thought on what the Mire had said before Dow killed him. War with the Union. Were these lot off to war? If they were then Bethod must have been scraping the pot.

'What's to do, Dogman?' asked Forley, as he stepped back into the camp. 'What's happening down there?'

'Men. Armed, but none too well. Five score or more. Young and old mostly, heading south and west,' and the Dogman pointed off down the road.

Threetrees nodded. 'Towards Angland. He means it then, Bethod. He's making war on the Union, all the way. No amount of blood's enough for that one. He's taking every man can hold a spear.' That was no surprise, in its way. Bethod had never been one for half measures. He was all or nothing, and didn't care who got killed along the road. 'Every man,' muttered Threetrees to himself. 'If the Shanka come over the mountains now ...'

Dogman looked round. Frowning, worried, dirty faces. He knew what Threetrees was saying, they could all see it. If the Shanka came now, with no one left in the North to fight 'em, that business at the farm would be the best of it.

'We got to warn someone!' shouted Forley, 'we got to warn them!'

Threetrees shook his head. 'You heard the Mire. Yawl's gone, and

Rattleneck, and Sything. All dead and cold, and gone back to the mud. Bethod's King now, King of the Northmen.' Black Dow scowled and gobbled in the dirt. 'Spit all you like Dow, but facts is facts. There's no one left to warn.'

'No one but Bethod himself,' muttered the Dogman, miserable at having to say it.

'Then we got to tell him!' Forley looked round them all, desperate. 'He may be a heartless bastard but at least he's a man! He's better than the Flatheads ain't he? We got to tell someone!'

'Hah!' barked Dow. 'Hah! You think he'll listen to us, Weakest? You forgotten what he told us? Us and Ninefingers too? Never come back! You forgotten how close he come to killing us? You forgotten how much he hates each one of us?'

'Fears us,' said Grim.

'Hates and fears us,' muttered Threetrees, 'and he's wise to. Because we're strong. Named men. Known men. The type of men that others will follow.'

Tul nodded his big head. 'Aye, there'll be no welcome for us at Carleon I'm thinking. No welcome without a spike on the end of it.'

'I'm not strong!' shouted Forley. 'I'm the Weakest, everyone knows that! Bethod's got no reason to fear me, nor to hate me neither. I'll go!'

Dogman looked at him, surprised. They all did. 'You?' asked Dow.

'Aye, me! I may be no fighter, but I'm no coward neither! I'll go and talk to him. Maybe he'll listen.' Dogman stood and stared. It was so long since any one of them had tried to talk their way out of a fix he'd forgotten it could be done.

'Might be he'll listen,' muttered Threetrees.

'He might listen,' said Tul. 'Then he might bloody kill you, Weakest!'

Dogman shook his head. 'It's quite a chance.'

'Maybe, but it's worth the doing, ain't it?'

They all looked at each other, worried. It was some bones that Forley was showing, no doubt, but the Dogman didn't much like the sound of this for a plan. He was a thin thread to hang your hopes on, was Bethod. A mighty thin thread.

But like Threetrees said, there was no one else.

Words and Dust

Kurster pranced around the outside of the circle, his long golden hair bouncing on his shoulders, waving to the crowd, blowing kisses to the girls. The audience cheered and howled and whooped as the lithe young man made his flashy rounds. He was an Aduan, an officer of the King's Own. *A local boy, and so very popular.*

Bremer dan Gorst was leaning against the barrier, watching his opponent dance through barely open eyes. His steels were unusually heavy-looking, weighty and worn and well-used, too heavy to be quick perhaps. Gorst himself looked too heavy to be quick, come to that, a great thick-necked bull of a man, more like a wrestler than a swordsman. He looked the underdog in this bout. The majority of the crowd seemed to think so. *But I know better.*

Nearby a bet-maker was shouting odds, taking money from the babbling people around him. Nearly all of the bets were for Kurster. Gloкта leaned across from his bench. 'What odds are you giving on Gorst now?'

'On Gorst?' asked the bet-maker, 'evens.'

'I'll take two hundred marks.'

'Sorry, friend, I can't cover that.'

'A hundred then, at five to four.'

The bet-maker thought about it for a moment, looking skywards as he worked out the sums in his head. 'Done.'

Gloкта sat back as the referee introduced the contestants, watching Gorst roll up his shirt-sleeves. The man's forearms were thick as tree trunks, heavy cords of muscle squirming as he worked his meaty fingers. He stretched his thick neck to one side and the other, then he took his steels from his second and loosed a couple of practice jabs. Few in the crowd noticed. They were busy cheering Kurster as he took his mark. But Gloкта saw. *Quicker than he looks. A lot, lot quicker. Those heavy steels no longer seem so clumsy.*

'Bremer dan Gorst!' shouted the referee, as the big man trudged to his mark. The applause was meagre indeed. This lumbering bull was no one's idea of a swordsman.

'Begin!'

It wasn't pretty. From the very start Gorst swung his heavy long steel in great heedless sweeps, like a champion woodsman chopping logs, giving throaty growls with every blow. It was a strange sight. One man was in a fencing contest, the other seemed to think he was fighting to the death. *You only have to touch him, man, not split him in half!* But as Gloкта watched, he realised the mighty cuts were not nearly so clumsy as they seemed. They were well-timed, and highly accurate. Kurster laughed as he danced away from the first great swing, smiled as he dodged the third, but by the fifth his smile was long gone. *And it doesn't look like coming back.*

It wasn't pretty at all. *But the power is undeniable.* Kurster ducked desperately

under another great arcing cut. *That one was hard enough to take his head off, blunted steels or no.*

The crowd's favourite did his best to seize the initiative, jabbing away for all he was worth, but Gorst was more than equal to it. He grunted as he turned the jabs efficiently away with his short steel, then growled again as he brought his long whistling around and over. Glokta winced as it smashed into Kurster's sword with a resounding crash, snapping the man's wrist back and nearly tearing the steel from his fingers. He stumbled back from the force of it, grimacing with pain and shock.

Now I realise why Gorst's steels seem so worn. Kurster dodged around the circle, trying to escape the onslaught, but the big man was too quick. *Far too quick.* Gorst had the measure of him now, anticipating every movement, harrying his opponent with relentless blows. There was no escape.

Two heavy thrusts drove the hapless officer back towards the edge of the circle, then a scything cut ripped his long steel from his hand and embedded it, wobbling wildly back and forth, in the turf. He staggered for a moment, eyes wide, his empty hand trembling, then Gorst was on him, letting go a roar and ramming full-tilt into his defenceless ribs with a heavy shoulder.

Glokta spluttered with laughter. *I never saw a swordsman fly before.* Kurster actually turned half a somersault, shrieking like a girl as he tumbled through the air, crashing to the ground with his limbs flopping and sliding away on his face. He finally came to rest in the sand outside the circle, a good three strides from where Gorst had hit him, groaning weakly.

The crowd was in shock, so quiet that Glokta's cackling had to be audible on the back row. Kurster's trainer rushed from his enclosure and gently turned his stricken student over. The young man kicked weakly, whimpered and clutched at his ribs. Gorst watched for a moment, emotionless, then shrugged and strolled back to his mark.

Kurster's trainer turned to the referee. 'I am sorry,' he said, 'but my pupil cannot continue.'

Glokta could not help himself. He had to clamp his mouth shut with his hands. His whole body was shaking with laughter. Each gurgle caused a painful spasm in his neck, but he didn't care. It seemed the majority of the crowd had not found the spectacle quite so amusing. Angry mutterings sprang up all around him. The grumbling turned to boos as Kurster was helped from the circle, draped between his trainer and his second, then the boos to a chorus of angry shouts.

Gorst swept the audience with his lazy, half-open eyes, then shrugged again and trudged slowly back to his enclosure. Glokta was still sniggering as he limped from the arena, his purse a good deal heavier than when he arrived. He hadn't had that much fun in years.

The University stood in a neglected corner of the Agriont, directly in the shadow of the House of the Maker, where even the birds seemed old and tired. A huge, ramshackle building, coated in half-dead ivy, its design plainly from an earlier age. It was said to be one of the oldest buildings in the city. *And it looks it.*

The roofs were sagging in the middle, a couple of them close to outright collapse. The delicate spires were crumbling, threatening to topple off into the

unkempt gardens below. The render on the walls was tired and grimy, and in places whole sections had fallen away to reveal the bare stones and crumbling mortar beneath. In one spot a great brown stain flared out down the wall from a section of broken guttering. There had been a time when the study of sciences had attracted some of the foremost men in the Union, when this building had been among the grandest in the city. *And Sult thinks the Inquisition is out of fashion.*

Two statues flanked the crumbling gate. Two old men, one with a lamp, one pointing at something in a book. *Wisdom and progress or some such rubbish.* The one with the book had lost his nose some time during the past century, the other was leaning at an angle, his lamp stuck out despairingly as though clutching for support.

Glokta raised his fist and hammered on the ancient doors. They rattled, moved noticeably, as if they might at any moment drop from their hinges. Glokta waited. Waited some time.

There was a sudden clatter of bolts being drawn back, and one half of the door wobbled open a few inches. An ancient face wedged itself into the gap and squinted out at him, lit underneath by a meagre taper clutched in a withered hand. Dewy old eyes peered up and down. 'Yes?'

'Inquisitor Glokta.'

'Ah, from the Arch Lector?'

Glokta frowned, surprised. 'Yes, that's right.' *They cannot be half so cut off from the world as they appear. He seems to know who I am.*

It was perilously dark within. Two enormous brass candelabras stood on either side of the door, but they were stripped of candles and had long gone unpolished, shining dully in the weak light from the porter's little taper. 'This way, sir,' wheezed the old man, shambling off, bent nearly double. Even Glokta had little trouble keeping up with him as he crept away through the gloom.

They shuffled together down a shadowy hallway. The windows on one side were ancient, made with tiny panes of glass so dirty that they would have let in little enough light on the sunniest of days. They let in none whatever as the sullen evening came on. The flickering candleflame danced over dusty paintings on the opposite wall, pale old men in dark gowns of black and grey, gazing wild-eyed from their flaking frames, flasks and cog-wheels and pairs of compasses clutched in their aged hands.

'Where are we going?' asked Glokta, after they had shambled through the murk for several minutes.

'The Adepts are at dinner,' wheezed the porter, glancing up at him with eyes infinitely tired.

The University's dining hall was an echoing cavern of a room, lifted one degree above total darkness by a few guttering candles. A small fire flickered in an enormous fireplace, casting dancing shadows among the rafters. A long table stretched the length of the floor, polished by long years of use, flanked by rickety chairs. It could easily have accommodated eighty but there were only five there, crowded up at one end, huddled in around the fireplace. They looked over as the taps of Glokta's cane echoed through the hall, pausing in their meals and peering over with great interest. The man at the head of the

table got to his feet and hurried over, holding the hem of his long black gown up with one hand.

‘A visitor,’ wheezed the porter, waving his candle in Glokta’s direction.

‘Ah, from the Arch Lector! I am Silber, the University Administrator!’ And he shook Glokta’s hand. His companions had meanwhile lurched and tottered to their feet as though the guest of honour had just arrived.

‘Inquisitor Glokta.’ He stared round at the eager old men. *A good deal more deference than I was expecting, I must say. But then, the Arch Lector’s name opens all kinds of doors.*

‘Glokta, Glokta,’ mumbled one of the old men, ‘seems that I remember a Glokta from somewhere.’

‘You remember everything from somewhere, but you never remember where,’ quipped the administrator, to half-hearted laughter. ‘Please let me make the introductions.’

He went round the four black-gowned scientists, one by one. ‘Saurizin, our Adeptus Chemical.’ A beefy, unkempt old fellow with burns and stains down the front of his robe and more than one bit of food in his beard. ‘Denka, the Adeptus Metallic.’ The youngest of the four by a considerable margin, though by no means a young man, had an arrogant twist to his mouth. ‘Chayle, our Adeptus Mechanical.’ Glokta had never seen a man with so big a head but so small a face. His ears, in particular, were immense, and sprouting grey hairs. ‘And Kandelaui, the Adeptus Physical.’ A scrawny old bird with a long neck and spectacles perched on his curving beak of a nose. ‘Please join us, Inquisitor,’ and the administrator indicated an empty chair, wedged in between two of the Adepti.

‘A glass of wine then?’ wheedled Chayle, a prim smile on his tiny mouth, already leaning forward with a decanter and sloshing some into a glass.

‘Very well.’

‘We were just discussing the relative merits of our various fields of study,’ murmured Kandelaui, peering at Glokta through his flashing spectacles.

‘As always,’ lamented the Administrator.

‘The human body is, of course, the only area worthy of true scrutiny,’ continued the Adeptus Physical. ‘One must appreciate the mysteries within, before turning one’s attention to the world without. We all have a body, Inquisitor. Means of healing it, and of harming it, are of paramount interest to us all. It is the human body that is my area of expertise.’

‘Bodies! Bodies!’ whined Chayle, pursing his little lips and pushing food around his plate. ‘We are trying to eat!’

‘Quite so! You are unsettling the Inquisitor with your ghoulish babble!’

‘Oh, I am not easily unsettled.’ Glokta leered across the table, giving the Adeptus Metallic a good view of his missing teeth. ‘My work for the Inquisition demands a more than passing knowledge of anatomy.’

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Saurizin took hold of the meat plate and offered it out. Glokta looked at the red slices, glistening on the plate. He licked at his empty gums. ‘Thank you, no.’

‘Is it true?’ asked the Adeptus Chemical, peering over the meat, voice hushed. ‘Will there be more funds? Now that this business with the Mercers is settled, that is?’

Glokta frowned. Everyone was staring at him, waiting for his reply. One of the old Adepti had his fork frozen halfway to his mouth. *So that's it. Money. But why would they be expecting money from the Arch Lector?* The heavy meat plate was beginning to wobble. *Well . . . if it gets them listening.* 'Money might be made available, depending, of course, on results.'

A hushed murmur crept around the table. The Adeptus Chemical carefully set down the plate with a trembling hand. 'I have been having a great deal of success with acids recently ...'

'Hah!' mocked the Adeptus Metallic. 'Results, the Inquisitor asked for, results! My new alloys will be stronger than steel when they are perfected!'

'Always the alloys!' sighed Chayle, turning his tiny eyes towards the ceiling. 'No one appreciates the importance of sound mechanical thinking!'

The other three Adepti rounded fiercely on him, but the Administrator jumped in first. 'Gentlemen, please! The Inquisitor is not interested in our little differences! Everyone will have time to discuss their latest work and show its merits. This is not a competition, is it Inquisitor?' Every eye turned toward Glokta. He looked slowly round at those old, expectant faces, and said nothing.

'I have developed a machine for—'

'My acids—'

'My alloys—'

'The mysteries of the human body—'

Glokta cut them off. 'Actually, it is in the area of . . . I suppose you would call them explosive substances, that I am currently taking a particular interest —'

The Adeptus Chemical jumped from his seat. 'That would be my province!' he cried, staring in triumph at his colleagues. 'I have samples! I have examples! Please follow me, Inquisitor!' And he tossed his cutlery onto his plate and set off towards one of the doors.

Saurizin's laboratory was precisely as one would have expected, almost down to the last detail. A long room with a barrel-vaulted ceiling, blackened in places with circles and streaks of soot. Shelves covered most of the wall-space, brimming with a confusion of boxes, jars, bottles, each filled with its own powders, fluids, rods of strange metal. There was no apparent order to the positions of the various containers, and most had no labels. *Organisation does not appear to be a priority.*

The benches in the middle of the room were even more confused, covered in towering constructions of glass and old brown copper: tubes, flasks and dishes, lamps – one with a naked flame burning. All gave the appearance of being ready at any moment to collapse, dousing anyone unfortunate enough to stand nearby with lethal, boiling poisons.

The Adeptus Chemical rummaged in amongst this mess like a mole in its warren. 'Now then,' he mumbled to himself, pulling at his dirty beard with one hand, 'blasting powders are somewhere here ...'

Glokta limped into the room after him, glancing suspiciously around at the mess of tubing that covered every surface. He wrinkled his nose. There was a revolting, acrid smell to the place.

'Here it is!' crowed the Adeptus, brandishing a dusty jar half-full of black

granules. He cleared a space on one of the benches, shoving the clinking and clanking glass and metal out of the way with a sweep of his meaty forearm. 'This stuff is terribly rare, you know, Inquisitor, terribly rare!' He pulled out the stopper and tipped a line of black powder onto the wooden bench. 'Few men have been fortunate enough to see this stuff in action! Very few! And you are about to become one of them!'

Glokta took a cautious step back, the size of the ragged hole in the wall of the Tower of Chains still fresh in his mind. 'We are safe, I hope, at this distance?'

'Absolutely,' murmured Saurizin, gingerly holding a burning taper out at arm's length and touching it to one end of the line of powder. 'There is no danger whatso—'

There was a sharp pop and a shower of white sparks. The Adeptus Chemical leaped back, nearly blundering into Glokta and dropping his lighted taper on the floor. There was another pop, louder, more sparks. A foul-smelling smoke began to fill the laboratory. There was a bright flash and a loud bang, a weak fizzling, and that was all.

Saurizin flapped the long sleeve of his gown in front of his face, trying to clear the thick smoke that had now thrown the whole chamber into gloom. 'Impressive, eh, Inquisitor?' he asked, before dissolving into a fit of coughing.

Not really. Glokta ground the still-flaming taper out under his boot and stepped through the murk towards the bench. He brushed aside a quantity of grey ash with the side of his hand. There was a long, black burn on the surface of the wood, but nothing more. The foul-smelling fumes were indeed the most impressive effect, already clawing at the back of Glokta's throat. 'It certainly produces a great deal of smoke,' he croaked.

'It does,' coughed the Adeptus proudly, 'and reeks to high heaven.'

Glokta stared at that blackened smear on the bench. 'If one had a large enough quantity of this powder, could it be used to, say, knock a hole through a wall?'

'Possibly . . . if one could accumulate a large enough quantity, who knows what could be done? As far as I know no one has ever tried.'

'A wall, say, four feet thick?'

The Adeptus frowned. 'Perhaps, but you'd need barrels of the stuff! Barrels! There isn't that much in the whole Union, and the cost, even if it could be found, would be colossal! Please understand, Inquisitor, that the components must be imported from the distant south of Kanta, and are rarities even there. I would be happy to look into the possibility, of course, but I would need considerable funding—'

'Thank you again for your time.' Glokta turned and began to limp through the thinning smoke towards the door.

'I have made some significant progress with acids recently!' cried the Adeptus, voice cracking. 'You really should see those as well!' He took a shuddering breath. 'Tell the Arch Lector . . . significant progress!' He dissolved into another fit of coughing, and Glokta shut the door tightly behind him.

A waste of my time. Our Bayaz could not have smuggled barrels of powder into that room. Even then, how much smoke, how great a smell would it have made? A waste of my time.

Silber was lurking in the hallway outside. 'Is there anything else that we can show you, Inquisitor?'

Glokta paused for a moment. 'Does anyone here know anything about magic?'

The Administrator's jaw muscles clenched. 'A joke of course. Perhaps—'
'Magic, I said.'

Silber narrowed his eyes. 'You must understand that we are a scientific institution. The practice of magic, so called, would be most . . . inappropriate.'

Glokta frowned at the man. *I'm not asking you to get your wand out, fool.* 'From a historical standpoint,' he snapped, 'the Magi, and so on. Bayaz!'

'Ah, from a historical standpoint, I see.' Silber's taut face relaxed slightly. 'Our library contains a wide range of ancient texts, some of them dating back to the period when magic was considered . . . less remarkable.'

'Who can assist me?'

The Administrator raised his brows. 'I am afraid that the Adeptus Historical is, ah, something of a relic.'

'I need to speak with him, not fence with him.'

'Of course, Inquisitor, this way.'

Glokta grabbed the handle of an ancient-looking door, studded with black rivets, began to turn it. He felt Silber seize his arm.

'No!' he snapped, guiding Glokta away down a corridor beside. 'The stacks are down here.'

The Adeptus Historical seemed indeed to be a part of ancient history himself. His face was a mask of lined and sagging half-transparent skin. Sparse hairs, snowy white, stuck unkempt from his head. There were only a quarter as many as there should have been, but each was four times longer than you would expect, hence his eyebrows were thin, yet sprouted out to impressive length in all directions, like the whiskers of a cat. His mouth hung slack, weak, and toothless, hands were withered gloves, several sizes too big. Only his eyes showed any trace of life, peering up at Glokta and the administrator as they approached.

'Visitors, is it?' croaked the old man, apparently talking to a large black crow perched on his desk.

'This is Inquisitor Glokta!' bellowed the Administrator, leaning down towards the old man's ear.

'Glokta?'

'From the Arch Lector!'

'Is it?' The Adeptus Historical squinted up with his ancient eyes.

'He's somewhat deaf,' Silber murmured, 'but no one knows these books like he does.' He thought about it for a moment, peering round at the endless stacks, disappearing into the gloom. 'No one else knows these books at all.'

'Thank you,' said Glokta. The Administrator nodded and strode off towards the stairs. Glokta took a step towards the old man and the crow leaped from the table and scrambled into the air, shedding feathers, flapping madly around the ceiling. Glokta hobbled painfully back. *I was sure the damn thing was stuffed.* He watched it suspiciously until it clattered to a halt on top of one of the shelves and perched there motionless, staring at him with its beady yellow eyes.

Glokta pulled out a chair and dropped into it. 'I need to know about Bayaz.'
'Bayaz,' muttered the ancient Adeptus. 'The first letter in the alphabet of the old tongue, of course.'

'I didn't know that.'

'The world's brimming full of what you don't know, young man.' The bird gave a sudden harsh caw, horribly loud in the dusty silence of the stacks. 'Brimming full.'

'Then let's begin my education. It's the man Bayaz, I need to know about. The First of the Magi.'

'Bayaz. The name great Juvens gave to his first apprentice. One letter, one name. First apprentice, first letter of the alphabet, you understand?'

'I'm just about keeping up. Did he really exist?'

The ancient Adeptus scowled. 'Unquestionably. Did you not have a tutor as a young man?'

'I did, unfortunately.'

'Did he not teach you history?'

'He tried, but my mind was on fencing and girls.'

'Ah. I lost interest in such things a long time ago.'

'So did I. Let us return to Bayaz.'

The old man sighed. 'Long ago, before there was a Union, Midderland was made of many petty kingdoms, often at war with one another, rising and falling with the passing years. One of these was ruled by a man called Harod, later to become Harod the Great. You've heard of him, I assume?'

'Of course.'

'Bayaz came to Harod's throne room, and promised to make him King of all Midderland if he did as he was told. Harod, being young and headstrong, did not believe him, but Bayaz broke the long table with his Art.'

'Magic, eh?'

'So the story goes. Harod was impressed—'

'Understandable.'

'—and he agreed to accept the advice of the Magus—'

'Which was?'

'To make his capital here, in Adua. To make peace with certain neighbours, war with others, and when and how to do it.' The old man squinted across at Glokta. 'Are you telling this story or am I?'

'You are.' *And you're taking your time about it.*

'Bayaz was good as his word. In time Midderland was unified, Harod became its first High King, the Union was born.'

'Then what?'

'Bayaz served as Harod's chief counsellor. Our laws and statutes, the very structure of our government, all are said to be his inventions, little changed since those ancient days. He established the Councils, Closed and Open, he formed the Inquisition. On Harod's death he left the Union, promising one day to return.'

'I see. How much of this is true, do you think?'

'Hard to say. Magus? Wizard? Magician?' The old man looked at the flickering candle flame. 'To a savage, that candle might be magic. It's a fine line indeed, between magic and trickery, eh? But this Bayaz was a cunning

mind in his day, that's a fact.'

This is all useless. 'What about before?'

'Before what?'

'Before the Union. Before Harod.'

The old man shrugged. 'Record-keeping was hardly a priority during the dark ages. The whole world was in chaos after the war between Juvens and his brother Kanedias—'

'Kanedias? The Master Maker?'

'Aye.'

Kanedias. He stares down from the walls of my little room in the cellars beneath Severard's charming town house. Juvens dead, his eleven apprentices, the Magi, marching to avenge him. I know this tale.

'Kanedias,' murmured Glokta, the image of that dark figure with the flames behind clear in his mind. 'The Master Maker. Was he real?'

'Hard to say. He's in the ground between myth and history, I suppose. Probably there's some grain of truth in it. Someone must have built that big bloody tower, eh?'

'Tower?'

'The House of the Maker!' The old man gestured at the room around them. 'And they say he built all this as well.'

'What, this library?'

The old man laughed. 'The whole Agriont, or at least the rock on which it stands. The University too. He built it, appointed the first Adepts to help him with his works, whatever they were, to look into the nature of things. We here are the Maker's disciples, yes, though I doubt they know it upstairs. He is gone but the work continues, eh?'

'After a fashion. Where did he go?'

'Hah. Dead. Your friend Bayaz killed him.'

Glokta raised an eyebrow. 'Did he really?'

'So the story goes. Have you not read *The Fall of the Master Maker*?'

'That rubbish? I thought it was all invention.'

'So it is. Sensational claptrap, but based on writings from the time.'

'Writings? Such things survive?'

The old man narrowed his eyes. 'Some.'

'Some? You have them here?'

'One in particular.'

Glokta fixed the old man with his eye. 'Bring it to me.'

The ancient paper crackled as the Adeptus Historical carefully unrolled the scroll and spread it out on the table. The parchment was yellow and crumpled, edges rough with age, scrawled with a dense script: strange characters, utterly unintelligible to Glokta's eye.

'What is it written in?'

'The old tongue. Few can read this now.' The old man pointed to the first line. 'An account of the fall of Kanedias, this says, the third of three.'

'Third of three?'

'Of three scrolls, I presume.'

'Where are the other two?'

'Lost.'

‘Huh.’ Glokta peered into the endless darkness of the stacks.

It’s a wonder anything can be found down here. ‘What does this one say?’

The ancient librarian peered down at the strange writing, poorly illuminated by the single flickering candle, his trembling forefinger tracing across the parchment, his lips moving silently. ‘Great was their fury.’

‘What?’

‘That’s how it begins. Great was their fury.’ He began slowly to read. ‘The Magi pursued Kanedias, driving his faithful before them. They broke his fortress, laying ruin to his buildings and killing his servants. The Maker himself, sore wounded in the battle with his brother Juvens, took refuge in his House.’ The old man unrolled a little more. ‘Twelve days and twelve nights, the Magi threw their wrath against the gates, but could not mark them. Then Bayaz found a way inside . . .’ The Adeptus swept his hand over the parchment in frustration. Damp, or something, had blurred the characters in the next section. ‘I can’t make this out . . . something about the Maker’s daughter?’

‘You sure?’

‘No!’ snapped the old man. ‘There’s a whole section missing!’

‘Ignore it then! What’s the next thing you can be sure of?’

‘Well, let’s see . . . Bayaz followed him to the roof, and cast him down.’ The old man noisily cleared his throat. ‘The Maker fell burning, and broke upon the bridge below. The Magi searched high and low for the Seed, but could not find it.’

‘Seed?’ asked Glokta, baffled.

‘That’s all that’s written.’

‘What the hell does it mean?’

The old man sagged back in his chair, evidently enjoying this rare opportunity to hold forth on his area of expertise. ‘The end of the age of myth, the beginning of the age of reason. Bayaz, the Magi, they represent order. The Maker is a god-like figure: superstition, ignorance, I don’t know. There must be some truth to him. After all, someone built that big bloody tower,’ and he wheezed with breathy laughter.

Glokta could not be bothered to point out that the Adeptus had made the very same joke a few minutes before. *And it wasn’t funny then. Repetition – the curse of the old.* ‘What about this Seed?’

‘Magic, secrets, power? It’s all a metaphor.’

I will not impress the Arch Lector with metaphors. Especially bad ones. ‘Is there no more?’

‘It goes on a bit, let’s see.’ He looked back at the symbols. ‘He broke on the bridge, they searched for the Seed ...’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Patience, Inquisitor.’ His withered finger traced across the characters. ‘They sealed up the House of the Maker. They buried the fallen, Kanedias and his daughter among them. That’s all.’ He peered at the page, his finger hovering over the last few letters. ‘And Bayaz took the key. That’s all.’

Glokta’s eyebrows went up. ‘What? What was that last bit?’

‘They sealed the gates, they buried the fallen, and Bayaz took the key.’

‘The key? The key to the House of the Maker?’

The Adeptus Historical squinted back at the page. ‘That’s what it says.’

There is no key. That tower has stood sealed for centuries, everyone knows it. Our impostor will have no key, that's sure. Slowly, Glokta began to smile. It is thin, it is very thin, but with the right setting, the right emphasis, it might be enough. The Arch Lector will be pleased.

'I'll be taking this.' Glokta pulled the ancient scroll over and started to roll it up.

'What?' The eyes of the Adeptus were wide with horror. 'You can't!' He staggered up from his chair, even more painfully than Glokta might have done. His crow scrambled up with him, flapping around near the ceiling and croaking in a fury, but Glokta ignored them both. 'You can't take it! It's irreplaceable,' wheezed the old man, making a hopeless grab for the scroll.

Glokta spread his arms out wide. 'Stop me! Why don't you? I'd like to see it! Can you imagine? We two cripples, floundering around in the stacks with a bird loosing its droppings on us, tugging this old piece of paper to and fro?' He giggled to himself. 'That wouldn't be very dignified, would it?'

The Adeptus Historical, exhausted by his pitiful efforts, crumpled back into his chair, breathing hard. 'No one cares about the past any more,' he whispered. 'They don't see that you can't have a future without a past.'

How very deep. Glokta slipped the rolled-up parchment into his coat and turned to leave.

'Who's going to look after the past, when I'm gone?'

'Who cares?' asked Glokta as he stalked towards the steps, 'as long as it isn't me.'

The Remarkable Talents of Brother Longfoot

The cheering had woken Logen every morning for a week. It started early, ripping him from his sleep, loud as a battle close at hand. He'd thought it was a battle when he first heard it, but now he knew it was just their damn stupid sport. Closing the window brought some relief from the noise, but the heat soon became unbearable. It was sleep a little, or sleep not at all. So he left the window open.

Logen rubbed his eyes, cursing, and hauled himself from his bed. Another hot, tedious day in the City of White Towers. On the road, in the wild, he'd be alert as soon as his eyes opened, but here things were different. The boredom and the heat were making him slow and lazy. He stumbled across the threshold into the living room, yawning wide and rubbing at his jaw with one hand. He stopped.

There was someone in there, a stranger. Standing at the window, bathed in sunlight with his hands clasped behind him. A small, slight man, with hair shaved close to his knobbly skull and strange, travel-worn clothes – faded, baggy cloth wrapped round and round his body.

Before Logen had a chance to speak, the man turned and sprang nimbly over to him. 'And you are?' he demanded. His smiling face was deeply tanned and weather-beaten, like the creased leather on a favourite pair of boots. It made it impossible to guess his age. He could have been anywhere from twenty-five to fifty.

'Ninefingers,' muttered Logen, taking a cautious step back towards the wall.

'Ninefingers, yes.' The little man pressed forwards and seized Logen's hand in both of his, gripping it tightly. 'It is an honour and privilege most profound,' he said, closing his eyes and bowing his head, 'to make your acquaintance!'

'You've heard of me?'

'Alas, no, but all God's creatures are worthy of the deepest respect.' He bowed his head again. 'I am Brother Longfoot, a traveller of the illustrious order of Navigators. There are few lands beneath the sun upon which my feet have not trodden.' He pointed down towards his well-worn boots then spread his arms wide. 'From the mountains of Thond to the deserts of Shamir, from the plains of the Old Empire to the silver waters of the Thousand Isles, all the world is my home! Truly!'

He spoke the northern tongue well, better than Logen himself perhaps. 'And the North too?'

'One brief visit, in my youth. I found the climate somewhat harsh.'

'You speak the language well enough.'

'There are few tongues that I, Brother Longfoot, cannot speak.'

An effortless skill with languages is but one among my many remarkable talents.' The man beamed. 'God has truly blessed me,' he added.

Logen wondered if this might be some elaborate joke. 'What brings you here?'

'I have been sent for!' His dark eyes sparkled.

'Sent for?'

'Indeed I have! By Bayaz, the First of the Magi! I have been sent for, and I have come! That is my way! A most generous contribution to the coffers of the order has been made in return for my remarkable talents, but I would have come without it. Indeed. Without it!'

'Really?'

'Indeed!' The small man stepped away and started to stride around the room at a terrific pace, rubbing his hands together. 'The challenge of this assignment spoke as much to the pride of the order, as to its well-documented greed! And it was I! I who was selected, from all the Navigators within the Circle of the World, for this task! I, Brother Longfoot! I, and no other! Who in my position, of my reputation, could resist such a challenge?'

He stopped before Logen and looked up at him expectantly, as if waiting for an answer to his question. 'Er—'

'Not I!' shouted Longfoot, setting off on another circuit of the room. 'I did not resist it! Why would I? That would not be my way! To journey to the very edge of the World? What a tale that will make! What an inspiration to others! What an—'

'The edge of the World?' asked Logen suspiciously.

'I know!' The strange man clapped him on the arm. 'We are equally excited!'

'This must be our Navigator.' Bayaz emerged from his room.

'I am indeed. Brother Longfoot, at your service. And you are, I presume, none other than my illustrious employer, Bayaz, the First of the Magi.'

'I am he.'

'It is an honour and a privilege most profound!' cried Longfoot, springing forward and seizing the Magus by the hand, 'to make your acquaintance!'

'Likewise. I trust your journey was a pleasant one.'

'Journeys are always pleasant to me! Always! It is the time between them that I find trying. Indeed it is!' Bayaz frowned over at Logen but he could only shrug his shoulders. 'May I ask how long it will be until we begin our journey? I am most keen to embark!'

'Soon, I hope, the last member of our expedition will arrive. We will need to charter a ship.'

'Of course! It shall be my particular pleasure to do so! What shall I tell the captain of our course?'

'West across the Circle Sea, to Stariksa, then on to Calcis in the Old Empire.' The little man smiled and bowed low. 'You approve?'

'I do, but ships rarely pass to Calcis now. The Old Empire's endless wars have made the waters dangerous thereabouts. Piracy, alas, is rife. It may be difficult to find a captain willing.'

'This should help.' Bayaz tossed his ever-bulging purse onto the table.

'It should indeed.'

'Make sure the ship is fast. Once we are ready I do not wish to waste a day.'

'On that you may depend,' said the Navigator, scooping up the heavy bag of coins. 'To sail in slow vessels is not my way! No! I will find for you the fastest

ship in all Adua! Yes! She shall fly like the breath of God! She shall skip over the waves like—'

'Merely fast will do.'

The little man inclined his head. 'The time of departure?'

'Within the month.' Bayaz looked at Logen. 'Why don't you go with him?'

'Uh?'

'Yes!' shouted the Navigator, 'we will go together!' He grabbed Logen by the elbow and began to pull him towards the door.

'I will expect some change, Brother Longfoot!' called Bayaz, from behind.

The Navigator turned in the doorway. 'There will be change, on that you may depend. An eye for value, a flair for barter, a dauntless purpose in negotiation! These are but three,' and he smiled broadly, 'of my remarkable talents!'

'It is a fabulous place, this Adua. Truly. Few cities are its equal. Shaffa, perhaps, is larger, but so very dusty. None could deny that Westport and Dagoska have their sights. Some think of Ospria, on its mountain slopes, as the most beautiful city of the world, but Brother Longfoot's heart, it must be said, belongs to great Talins. Have you been there, Master Ninefingers, have you seen that noble settlement?'

'Er . . .' Logen was busy trying to keep up with the little man, dodging between the endless flow of people.

Longfoot stopped so suddenly that Logen almost piled into him. The Navigator turned, his hands raised, a faraway look in his eye. 'Talins at sunset, seen from the ocean! I have witnessed many remarkable things, believe me, but I declare that to be the most beautiful sight in all the world. The way the sun gleams on the myriad canals, on the glinting domes of the Grand Duke's citadel, on the graceful palaces of the merchant princes! Where now does the shining sea end, and the shining city begin? Ah! Talins!' He turned and charged off once more and Logen hurried after him.

'But this Adua is a fine place, certainly, and growing every year. Things have changed a great deal here since my last visit, indeed they have. Once there were only noblemen and commoners. The noblemen owned the land so they had the money and therefore the power. Ha. Simple, you see?'

'Well—' Logen was having trouble seeing much further than Longfoot's back.

'But now they have trade, and so much of it. Merchants, and bankers, and so forth. Everywhere. Armies of them. Now commoners can be rich, you see? And a rich commoner has power. Is he a commoner now, or a nobleman? Or is he something else? Ha. Very complicated all of a sudden, no?'

'Er—'

'So much wealth. So much money. But so much poverty too, eh? So many beggars, so many poor. Hardly healthy, so rich and so poor, so close together, but it's a fine place still, and always growing.'

'I find it too crowded,' mumbled Logen as a shoulder barged past him, 'and too hot.'

'Bah! Crowded? Do you call this crowded? You should see the great temple in Shaffa at morning prayer! Or the grand square before the Emperor's palace when new slaves are up for auction! And hot? Do you call this hot? In Ul-

Saffayn, in the far south of Gurkhul, it gets so hot during the summer months that you can cook an egg on your doorstep. Truly! This way.' He ducked through the passing crowds towards a narrow sidestreet. 'This way is the quickest!'

Logen caught him by the arm. 'Down there?' He peered into the gloom. 'You sure?'

'Can you doubt it?' demanded Longfoot, suddenly horrified. 'Can it be that you could doubt it? Among all my remarkable talents, it is my skill at navigation that is paramount! It is for that talent, above all, that the First of the Magi has made so generous a contribution to the coffers of the order! Could it be that you . . . but wait.' He held up his hand and began to smile again, then tapped Logen on the chest with his forefinger. 'You do not know Brother Longfoot. Not yet. You are watchful and cautious, I see it, fine qualities in their place. I cannot expect you to have *my* unshakeable faith in my abilities. No! That would not be fair. Unfairness is not an admirable quality. No! Unfairness is not my way.'

'I meant—'

'I shall convince you!' shouted Longfoot. 'Indeed I shall! You will come to trust my word before your own! Yes! This way is the quickest!' And he strode off down the dingy alleyway with remarkable speed, Logen struggling to keep up though his legs were a good half-foot longer.

'Ah, the back streets!' called the Navigator over his shoulder as they passed down dark and grimy lanes, the buildings crowding in ever closer. 'The back streets, eh?' The alleys grew narrower, darker, and dirtier still. The little man turned to the left and the right, never pausing for an instant to consider his course. 'Do you smell that? Do you smell that, Master Ninefingers? It smells like . . .' he rubbed his thumbs and fingertips together as he strode along, searching for the words ' . . . mystery! Adventure!'

It smelled like shit to Logen. A man lay on his face in the gutter, dead drunk perhaps, or maybe simply dead. Other men passed by, limping and haggard, or standing in threatening groups in doorways, handing round bottles. There were women here too.

'Four marks and I'll give you a blessing, Northman!' one of them called to Logen as they passed. 'A blessing you won't soon forget! Three, then!'

'Whores,' whispered Longfoot, shaking his head, 'and cheap ones too. You like women?'

'Well—'

'You should go to Ul-Nahb my friend! Ul-Nahb on the shores of the Southern Sea! You could buy a bed-slave there. Indeed you could! They cost a fortune, but they train these girls for years!'

'You can buy a girl?' asked Logen, mystified.

'Boys too, if your taste bends that way.'

'Eh?'

'They train them for years, truly. It's a whole industry down there. You want skilled? Do you? These girls have skills you wouldn't believe! Or visit Sipani! There are places in that city – phew! The women are beautiful, beautiful every one! Truly! Like princesses! And clean,' he muttered, peering at one of the scruffy women by the roadside.

A bit of dirt didn't bother Logen any. Skilled and beautiful all sounded too complicated to him. One girl caught his eye as they passed, leaning against a door-frame with one arm up. Watching them pass with a half-hearted smile. Logen found her pretty, in a desperate sort of a way. Prettier than he was anyway, and it had been a long time. You have to be realistic about these things.

Logen stopped in the street. 'Bayaz wanted change?' he muttered.

'He did. He was most specific on the subject.'

'There's money to spare, then?'

Longfoot raised one eyebrow. 'Well, perhaps, let me see ...'

He pulled out the purse with a flourish and opened it, rooting around inside. There was a loud jingling of coins.

'You think that's a good idea?' Logen glanced nervously up and down the street. Several faces had turned towards them.

'What's that?' asked the Navigator, still poking around in the purse. He pulled some coins out, holding them up to the light and peering at them, then pressed them into Logen's palm.

'Subtlety isn't one of your talents, is it?' Some of the shabby men in the alley began to move slowly, curiously towards them, two from in front, one from behind.

'No indeed!' laughed Longfoot. 'No indeed! I am a straight-talking man, that is my way! Yes indeed! I am a . . . ah.' He had noticed the shadowy figures sidling towards them now. 'Ah. This is unfortunate. Oh dear.'

Logen turned to the girl. 'Do you mind if we . . .' She slammed the door shut in his face. Other doors up and down the street began to close. 'Shit.' he said. 'How are you at fighting?'

'God has seen fit to bless me with many remarkable talents,' murmured the navigator, 'but combat is not one of them.'

One of the men had an ugly squint. 'That's a big purse for a little man,' he said, as he came close.

'Well, er . . .' murmured Longfoot, creeping behind Logen's shoulder.

'An awful big load for a little man to carry,' said the other.

'Why not let us help you with it?'

Neither one of them had weapons ready, but by the way their hands were moving Logen knew they had them. There was a third man behind him too, he could sense him moving forwards now. Close. Closer than the other two. If he could deal with that one first, the one behind, his chances might be good. He couldn't risk looking round, that would spoil the surprise. He'd simply have to hope for the best. As always.

Logen gritted his teeth and flung his elbow backwards. It hit the man behind in the jaw with a heavy crunch, and Logen caught his wrist in his other hand, which was lucky, because he had a knife out and ready. Logen smashed him in the mouth with his elbow again, tearing the blade from his limp fingers as he dropped into the street, head smacking against the dirty cobbles. He whipped round, half expecting to get stabbed in the back, but the other two hadn't moved too quick. They had knives of their own out, and one had taken a half-step towards him, but he paused when he saw that Logen had the blade up, ready to fight.

It was a meagre kind of a weapon, six inches of rusty iron without even a cross-piece, but it was better than nothing. A lot better. Logen waved it around in the air in front of him, just to make sure that everyone could see it. Felt good. His odds were much improved.

'Right then,' said Logen, 'who's next?'

The other two moved apart, trying to get to either side of him, weighing their knives in their hands, but they didn't seem in any great rush to come on.

'We can take him!' whispered the squinter, but his friend didn't look too sure.

'Or, you can have this.' Logen opened up his clenched fist, showing the coins that Longfoot had given him. 'And leave us be. This much I can spare.' He swished the knife around a bit more, just to add some weight to his words. 'This is what you're worth to me – this much, no more. What's it to be?'

The one with the squint spat on the ground. 'We can take him!' he hissed again. 'You go first!'

'You fucking go!' shouted the other.

'Just take what I'm offering,' said Logen, 'then we none of us have to go.'

The one that he'd elbowed groaned and rolled over in the road, and the reminder of his fate seemed to decide them. 'Alright, you fucking northern bastard, alright, we'll take it!'

Logen grinned. He thought about throwing the coins at the one with the squint then stabbing him while he was distracted. That's what he'd have done in his youth, but he decided against. Why bother? Instead he opened his fingers and tossed the money into the road behind him, moving towards the nearest wall. He and the two thieves circled each other cautiously, each step taking them closer to the coins and him closer to escape. Soon they'd swapped places, and Logen backed away down the street, still holding the knife in front of him. When they were ten paces apart the two men squatted down and began to pick the scattered coins up from the ground.

'I'm still alive,' Logen whispered to himself as he quickened his pace.

That had been lucky, he knew. It's a fool who thinks that any fight is too small to be the death of him, however tough he is. Lucky that he caught the one behind just right. Lucky that the other two had been slow. But then he'd always been lucky with fights. Lucky at getting out of them alive. Not so lucky with the getting into them. Still, he felt good about this day's work. Glad he hadn't killed anybody.

Logen felt a hand clap him on the back, and he span round, knife at the ready.

'Only me!' Brother Longfoot held up his hands. Logen had nearly forgotten the Navigator was there. He must have stayed behind him the whole time, perfectly silent. 'Well handled Master Ninefingers, well handled! Truly! I see that you are not without some talents of your own! I am looking forward to travelling with you, I am indeed! The docks are this way!' he shouted, already moving off.

Logen took one last look back at the two men, but they were still grubbing around on the ground, so he threw the knife away and hurried to catch up to Longfoot. 'Do you Navigators never fight?'

'Some among us do, oh yes, with empty hands and weapons of all kinds.

Most deadly, some of them, but not I. No. That is not my way.'

'Never?'

'Never. My skills lie elsewhere.'

'I would have thought your travels would bring you across many dangers.'

'They do,' said Longfoot brightly, 'they do indeed. That is when my remarkable talent for hiding is at its most useful.'

Her Kind Fight Everything

Night. Cold. The salt wind was keen on the hilltop, and Ferro's clothes were thin and ragged. She hugged her arms and hunched up her shoulders, staring sourly down towards the sea. Dagoska was a cloud of pin-prick lights in the distance, huddled around the steep rock between the great, curving bay and the glistening ocean. Her eyes could make out the vague, tiny shapes of walls and towers, black against the dark sky, and the thin neck of dry earth that joined the city to the land. An island, almost. Between them and Dagoska there were fires. Camps around the roads. Many camps.

'Dagoska,' whispered Yulwei, perched on a rock beside her. 'A little splinter of the Union, stuck into Gurkhul like a thorn. A thorn in the Emperor's pride.'

'Huh,' grunted Ferro, hunching her shoulders still further.

'The city is watched. Many soldiers. More than ever. It might be difficult to deceive so many.'

'Perhaps we should go back,' she muttered hopefully.

The old man ignored her. '*They* are here as well. More than one.'

'Eaters?'

'I must go closer. Find a way in. Wait here for me.' He paused, waiting for her to reply. 'You will wait?'

'Alright!' she hissed, 'alright, I'll wait!'

Yulwei slipped off his rock and away down the slope, padding across the soft earth, almost invisible in the inky blackness. When the sound of his jingling bangles had faded into the night, she turned away from the city, took a deep breath, and scurried down the slope southwards, back into Gurkhul.

Now Ferro could run. Fast as the wind, hours at a stretch. She'd spent a lot of time running. When she made it to the base of the hill she ran, feet flying across the open ground, breath coming quick and fierce. She heard water beyond, slid down a bank and splashed into the shallows of a slow moving river. She floundered on, knee-deep in the cold water.

Let the old bastard track me through this, she thought.

After a while she made a bundle of her weapons and held them above her head as she swam across, forcing against the current with one arm. She flapped out on the other side and ran on along the bank, wiping the water from her dripping face.

Time passed slowly and light began to creep into the sky. Morning was coming. The river babbled beside her, her sandals beating out a rapid rhythm in the stubbly grass. She left the river behind, running on across the flat landscape, turning now from black to grey. A clump of scrubby trees loomed up.

She crashed between the trunks and slithered down into the bushes, her breath rasping. She shivered in the half-light, heart pounding in her chest. It was silent beyond the trees. Good. She reached inside her clothes and pulled

out some bread and a strip of meat, soggy from the swim but still edible. She smiled. She had been keeping half of everything that Yulwei gave her for the last few days.

‘Stupid old bastard,’ she chuckled to herself between choking mouthfuls, ‘thought he could get the better of Ferro Maljinn, did he?’

Damn she was thirsty. No help for that now, she could find water later. She was tired though, very tired. Even Ferro got tired. She would rest here for a moment, just a moment. Get the strength back in the legs, then on, on to . . . she twitched, annoyed. She could think about the where later. Wherever was best for vengeance. Yes.

She crawled through the bushes, sat back against one of the trees. Her eyes closed slowly, by themselves. Just rest for a moment now. Vengeance later.

‘Stupid old bastard,’ she muttered. Her head dropped sideways.

‘Brother!’

Ferro woke with a start, head knocking against the tree. It was light, too light. Another bright, hot day. How long had she been sleeping? ‘Brother!’ A woman’s voice, not far off. ‘Where are you?’

‘Over here!’ Ferro froze, every muscle tensing. A man’s voice, deep and strong. And close. She heard horse’s hooves, moving slowly, several horses, and near.

‘What are you doing, brother?’

‘She’s close!’ shouted the man again. Ferro’s throat tightened. ‘I can smell her!’ Ferro felt in the bushes for her weapons, shoved the sword and the knife through her belt, tucked the other knife up her one, torn sleeve. ‘I can taste her, sister! She’s very close!’

‘But where?’ The woman’s voice drew nearer. ‘Do you think she can hear us?’

‘Perhaps she can!’ laughed the man. ‘Are you there, Maljinn?’ She threw her quiver over her shoulder and snatched up her bow. ‘We are waiting . . .’ he sang, getting closer still, just beyond the trees now. ‘Come out, Maljinn, come out and greet us . . .’

She bolted away, crashing through the bushes, sprinting across the open ground with desperate speed.

‘There she is!’ cried the woman from behind. ‘Look at her go!’

‘Get her, then!’ shouted the man.

The scrubby grassland stretched away unbroken before her. Nowhere to run to. She span around with a snarl, nocking an arrow to her bow. Four horsemen were spurring towards her, Gurmish soldiers, sun glinting on their tall helmets and the cruel heads of their spears. Behind them, further back, were two other riders: a man and a woman. ‘Stop! In the name of the Emperor!’ one of the horsemen shouted.

‘Fuck your Emperor!’ Her arrow caught the first of the soldiers through his neck and he tumbled backwards from the saddle with a shocked gurgle, his spear flying out of his hand.

‘Good shot!’ cried the woman. The second rider took an arrow in his chest. His breastplate slowed it, but it still went deep enough to kill. He screamed, dropping his sword in the grass, clutching at the shaft, rolling in the saddle.

The third never even made a sound. He got one in the mouth, at no more

than ten strides away. The point went right through his skull and knocked his helmet off, but by then the fourth was on her. She threw the bow to the ground and rolled away as the soldier thrust at her with his spear, then she pulled the sword from her belt, spitting on the grass.

‘Alive!’ shouted the woman, nudging her horse lazily forwards. ‘We need her alive!’

The soldier turned his snorting mount and urged it cautiously towards Ferro. He was a big man, with a thick growth of dark stubble on his jaw. ‘I hope you’ve made your peace with God, girl,’ he said.

‘Fuck your God!’ She scuttled out of the way, dodging, moving, staying close to the ground. The soldier jabbed at her with his spear, keeping her at a distance, his horse’s hooves pawing at the ground, kicking dust in Ferro’s face.

‘Poke her!’ she heard the woman shouting behind her.

‘Yes, poke her!’ cried her brother through his giggling. ‘But not too hard! We want her alive!’ The soldier snarled as he spurred his horse forward. Ferro ducked and scrambled in front of its kicking legs. The spear point jabbed, cutting a gash in her arm. She swung the sword with all her strength.

The curved blade found the gap between the plates of the soldier’s armour, took his leg off just below the knee and opened a huge wound in the horse’s side. Man and beast screamed together, fell together to the ground. Dark blood bubbled out across the dirt.

‘She got him!’ The woman sounded mildly disappointed.

‘Up, man!’ laughed her brother, ‘up and at her! There’s still a chance!’ The soldier thrashed on the ground. Ferro’s sword hacked into his face, putting a sharp end to his screams. Nearby the second rider was still in his saddle, face twisted, gasping his last breaths, hand clutched around the bloody shaft of her arrow. His horse put its head down and started nibbling at the dry grass by its hooves.

‘That’s all of them,’ said the woman.

‘I know.’ Her brother sighed deep. ‘Must one do everything oneself?’

Ferro glanced up at them as she pushed the bloody sword back through her belt. They were sitting carelessly on their horses not far off, the sun bright behind them, smiles on their cruel, handsome faces. They were dressed like lords, silk flapping round them in the breeze, heavy with jewellery, but neither one was armed. Ferro scrambled for her bow.

‘Be careful, brother,’ said the woman, examining her fingernails. ‘She fights well.’

‘Like a devil! But she is no match for me, sister, have no fear.’ He sprang down from his saddle. ‘So then, Maljinn, shall we . . .’

The arrow stuck him through the chest, deep through, with a hollow thud.

‘. . . begin?’ The shaft quivered, its point glittering behind him, dry and bloodless. He began to walk towards her. Her next arrow caught him through the shoulder, but he only came on faster, breaking into a run, bounding forward with enormous strides. She dropped the bow, fingers fumbling for the grip of her sword. Too slow. His outstretched arm caught her across the chest with terrible force, slamming her into the earth.

‘Oh, well done, brother!’ The woman clapped her hands with delight. ‘Well done!’

Ferro rolled coughing in the dust. She saw the man watching her as she struggled to her feet, the sword clutched in both hands. She swung it at him, a great overhead arc. It bit deep into the earth. Somehow he had already danced aside. A foot came out of nowhere and sank into her stomach. She doubled over, powerless, the air driven from her body. Her fingers twitched, the sword was left stuck in the ground, her knees wobbled.

‘And now . . .’ Something crunched into her nose. Her legs buckled and the ground hit her hard in the back. She rolled groggily to her knees, the world turning over around her. There was blood on her face. She blinked and shook her head, trying to stop the world from spinning. The man was moving towards her, tipping, blurry. He jerked her arrow out of his chest and tossed it away. There was no blood, just a little dust. Just dust, curling in the air.

An Eater. He had to be.

Ferro stumbled up, pulling the knife from her belt. She thrust at him, missed, thrust again, missed again. Her head was swimming. She screamed, slashing at him with all her might.

He caught her wrist in his hand. Their faces were less than a foot apart. His skin was perfect, smooth, like dark glass. He looked young, almost like a child, but his eyes were old. Hard eyes. He watched her – curious, amused, like a boy who found an interesting beetle. ‘She doesn’t give up, does she, sister?’

‘Very fierce! The Prophet will be delighted with her!’

The man sniffed at Ferro and wrinkled his nose. ‘Ugh. She’d better be washed first.’

She butted him in the face. His head snapped back but he only giggled. He caught her round the throat with his free hand, shoved her out to arm’s length. She clawed at his face but his arm was too long, she couldn’t reach. He was prising her fingers from the handle of the knife. His grip was iron around her neck. She couldn’t breathe. She bared her teeth, struggling, snarling, thrashing. All in vain.

‘Alive, brother! We want her alive!’

‘Alive,’ murmured the man, ‘but not unharmed.’

The woman giggled. Ferro’s feet left the ground, kicking at the air. She felt one of her fingers snap and the knife dropped to the grass. The hand gripped tighter round her neck, and she tore at it with broken nails. All in vain. The bright world began to turn dark.

Ferro heard the woman laughing, far away. A face swam out of the darkness, a hand stroked Ferro’s cheek. The fingers were soft, warm, gentle.

‘Be still, child,’ whispered the woman. Her eyes were dark and deep. Ferro could feel her breath, hot and fragrant on her face. ‘You are hurt, you must rest. Be still now . . . sleep.’ Ferro’s legs were heavy as lead. She kicked weakly, one last time, then her body sagged. Her heart beat slow . . .

‘Rest now.’ Ferro’s eyelids began to droop, the woman’s beautiful face grew blurred.

‘Sleep.’ Ferro bit down hard on her tongue, and her mouth turned salty.

‘Be still.’ Ferro spat blood in the woman’s face.

‘Gah!’ she shouted in disgust, wiping blood from her eyes. ‘She fights me!’

‘Her kind fight everything,’ came the man’s voice, just behind Ferro’s ear.

‘Now listen to me, whore!’ hissed the woman, clutching Ferro’s jaw with

steely fingers and yanking her face this way and that. 'You are coming with us! With us! One way or another! You hear me?'

'She goes nowhere.' Another voice, deep and mellow. It seemed familiar. Ferro blinked, shook her head groggily. The woman had turned, looking at an old man, not far away. Yulwei. His bangles jingled as he padded softly across the grass. 'Are you alive, Ferro?'

'Gugh,' she croaked.

The woman sneered at Yulwei. 'Who are you, old bastard?'

Yulwei sighed. 'I am an old bastard.'

'Get you gone, dog!' shouted the man. 'We come from the Prophet. From Khalul himself!'

'And she comes with us!'

Yulwei looked sad. 'I cannot change your minds?'

They laughed together. 'Fool!' cried the man. 'Our minds never change!' He let go of one of Ferro's arms, took a wary step forwards, dragging her with him.

'A shame,' said Yulwei, shaking his head. 'I would have had you carry my respects to Khalul.'

'The Prophet does not walk with the likes of you, beggar!'

'I might surprise you. We knew each other well, long ago.'

'I will give our master your respects then,' jeered the woman, 'with the news of your recent death!' Ferro twisted her wrist, felt the knife drop into her palm.

'Oh, Khalul would enjoy that news, but he will not receive it yet. The two of you have cursed yourselves. You have broken the Second Law. You have eaten the flesh of men, and there must be a reckoning.'

'Old fool!' sneered the woman. 'Your laws do not apply to us!'

Yulwei slowly shook his head. 'The word of Euz governs all. There can be no exceptions. Neither one of you will leave this place alive.' The air around the old man shimmered, twisted, blurred. The woman gave a gurgle and dropped suddenly to the earth, more than falling – melting, flopping, dark silk flapping around her collapsing body.

'Sister!' The man let go of Ferro, sprang at Yulwei, arms outstretched. He got no further than a stride. He gave a sudden, shrill scream and dropped to his knees, clutching at his head. Ferro forced her stumbling feet forward, grabbed hold of his hair with her broken hand and drove the knife into his neck. Dust blew out into the wind. A fountain of dust. Flames flickered around his mouth, charring his lips black, licking burning hot at her fingers. She dropped on top of him, bearing him back onto the ground, choking, snorting. The blade opened up his stomach, scraped against his ribs, snapped off in his chest. Fire licked out. Fire and dust. She hacked at the body mindlessly with the broken knife, long after it had stopped moving.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. 'He is dead, Ferro. They both are dead.' She saw it was true. The man lay on his back, staring up at the sky, face charred round his nose and mouth, dust blowing from the gaping wounds.

'I killed him.' Her voice cracked and broken in her throat.

'No, Ferro. I did that. They were young Eaters, weak and foolish. Still, you are lucky they wanted only to catch you.'

'I am lucky,' she mumbled, dribbling bloody spit onto the Eater's corpse. She dropped the broken knife, crawled away on all fours. The body of the woman lay next to her, if you could call it that. A shapeless, lumpy mass of flesh. She saw long hair, and an eye, and lips.

'What did you do?' she croaked through her bloody mouth.

'I turned her bones to water. And burned him from the inside. Water for one, fire for the other. Whatever works, for their kind.' Ferro rolled over on the grass, looked up at the bright sky. She held her hand in front of her face, shook it. One of her fingers flopped back and forth.

Yulwei's face appeared above, staring down at her. 'Does it hurt?'

'No,' she whispered, letting her arm drop back to the earth. 'It never does.' She blinked up at Yulwei. 'Why does it never hurt?'

The old man frowned. 'They will not stop seeking for you, Ferro. Do you see now, why you have to come with me?'

She nodded slowly. The effort was immense. 'I see,' she whispered. 'I see . . .' The world grew dark again.

She Loves Me . . . Not

‘Ah!’ cried Jezal, as the point of Filio’s steel dug hard into his shoulder. He stumbled back, wincing and cursing, and the Styrian smiled at him and flourished his steels.

‘A touch to Master Filio!’ bellowed the referee. ‘That’s two each!’ There was some scattered clapping as Filio strutted back to the contestant’s enclosure with an irritating smile across his face. ‘Slippery bastard,’ Jezal hissed to himself as he followed. He should have seen that lunge coming. He had been careless, and he knew it.

‘Two apiece?’ hissed Varuz, as Jezal flopped down into his chair, breathing hard. ‘Two apiece? Against this nobody? He’s not even from the Union!’

Jezal knew better than to point out that Westport was supposed to be a part of the Union these days. He knew what Varuz meant, and so did everyone else in the arena. The man was an outsider as far as they were concerned. He grabbed the cloth from West’s outstretched hands and wiped his sweaty face. Five touches was a long match, but Filio looked far from exhausted. He was springing up and down on his toes as Jezal glanced across, nodding his head to the noisy Styrian advice spilling from his trainer.

‘You can beat him!’ West murmured, as he handed Jezal the water bottle. ‘You can beat him, and then it’s the final.’ The final. That meant Gorst. Jezal wasn’t entirely sure he wanted any of that.

But Varuz was in no doubt. ‘Just damn well beat him!’ hissed the Marshal, as Jezal took a swig from the bottle, swilled it round in his mouth. ‘Just beat him!’ Jezal spat half out into the bucket and swallowed the rest. Just beat him. Easy to say, but he was a devious bastard, this Styrian.

‘You can do it!’ said West again, rubbing Jezal’s shoulder. ‘You’ve come this far!’

‘Kill him! Just kill him!’ Marshal Varuz stared into Jezal’s eyes. ‘Are you a nobody, Captain Luthar? Did I waste my time on you? Or are you somebody? Eh? Now’s the time to decide!’

‘Gentlemen, please!’ called the referee, ‘the deciding touch!’

Jezal blew out hard, took his steels from West, got to his feet. He could hear Filio’s trainer shouting encouragements over the swelling noise of the crowd. ‘Just kill him!’ shouted Varuz one last time, then Jezal was off on his way to the circle.

The deciding touch. The decider. In so many ways. Whether Jezal would be in the final or not. Whether he would be somebody or not. He was tired though, very tired. He had been fencing solidly for nearly half an hour, in the heat, and that takes it out of you. He was sweating again already. He could feel it leaking out of his face in big drops.

He moved towards his mark. A bit of chalk on some dry grass. Filio was standing there waiting, still smiling, anticipating his triumph. The little shit. If

Gorst could club those others around the circle, then surely Jezal could grind this fool's face in the turf. He squeezed the grips of his steels and concentrated on that nauseating little smile. He wished for a moment that the steels weren't blunted, until it occurred to him that he might be the one who got stabbed.

'Begin!'

Jezal sorted through his cards, shuffling them this way and that in his hands, barely even looking at the symbols on them, barely caring whether he kept them out of sight of the others.

'I'll raise you ten,' said Kaspas, sliding some coins across the table with a look that said . . . oh, something probably, Jezal didn't care what, he really wasn't concentrating. There was a lengthy pause.

'It's your bet, Jezal,' grumbled Jalenhorm.

'It is? Oh, er . . .' He scanned across the meaningless symbols, unable to take any of it too seriously. 'Erm, oh . . . I'll fold.' He tossed the cards on to the table. He was down today, well down, for the first time in he couldn't remember how long. Ever probably. He was too busy thinking about Ardee: wondering how he could bed her without doing either one of them lasting harm, most particularly without his being killed by West. He was still no closer to an answer, unfortunately.

Kaspas swept up the coins, smiling broadly at his most unlikely victory. 'So that was well fought today, Jezal. A close one, but you came through, eh?'

'Uh,' said Jezal. He took his pipe from the table.

'I swear, I thought he had you for a minute there, but then,' and he snapped his fingers under Brint's nose, 'just like that! Knocked him right over. The crowd loved it! I laughed so hard I nearly wet myself, I swear!'

'Do you reckon you can beat Gorst?' asked Jalenhorm.

'Uh.' Jezal shrugged, lighting the pipe and leaning back in his chair, looking up at the grey sky and sucking on the stem.

'You seem pretty calm about it all,' said Brint.

'Uh.'

The three officers glanced at each other, disappointed by the failure of their chosen topic. Kaspas picked another. 'Have you fellows seen the Princess Terez yet?'

Brint and Jalenhorm sighed and gasped, then the three of them prattled their gormless appreciation of the woman. 'Have I seen her? Have I ever!'

'They call her the jewel of Talins!'

'The rumours didn't lie where she's concerned!'

'I hear the marriage to Prince Ladisla is a fixed thing.'

'The lucky bastard!' And so on.

Jezal stayed where he was, sat back in his chair, blowing smoke at the sky. He wasn't so sure about Terez, from the little he'd seen. Beautiful from a distance, no doubt, but he imagined that her face would feel like glass to the touch: cold, hard and brittle. Nothing like Ardee's . . .

'Still,' Jalenhorm was spouting, 'I have to say, Kaspas, my heart still belongs to your cousin Ariss. Give me a Union girl any day over one of these foreigners.'

'Give you her money, you mean,' murmured Jezal, head still tipped back.

'No!' complained the big man. 'She's a perfect lady! Sweet, demure, well-

bred. Ah!’ Jezal smiled to himself. If Terez was cold glass, then Ariss was a dead fish. Kissing her would be like kissing an old rag, he imagined: limp and tedious. She couldn’t kiss the way Ardee did. No one could . . .

‘Well, they’re both of them beauties, no doubt,’ Brint was blathering, ‘fine women to dream about, if dreams are all you’re after . . .’ He leaned forward to a conspiratorial distance, smirking shiftily round as though he had something secret and exciting to say. The other two edged their chairs forward, but Jezal stayed where he was. He had no interest at all in hearing about whatever whore that idiot was bedding.

‘Have you met West’s sister?’ murmured Brint. Jezal’s every muscle stiffened. ‘She’s not the equal of those two of course, but she’s really quite pretty in a common sort of way and . . . I think she’d be willing.’ Brint licked his lips and nudged Jalenhorm in the ribs. The big man grinned guiltily like a schoolboy at a dirty joke. ‘Oh yes, she strikes me as the willing type.’ Kaspas giggled. Jezal put his pipe down on the table, noticing that his hand was trembling slightly. The other was gripping the arm of his chair so hard that his knuckles were white.

‘I do declare,’ said Brint, ‘if I didn’t think the Major would stick me with his sword, I’d be tempted to stick his sister with mine, eh?’ Jalenhorm spluttered with laughter. Jezal felt one of his eyes twitching as Brint turned his smirk towards him. ‘Well, Jezal, what do you think? You’ve met her haven’t you?’

‘What do I think?’ His voice seemed to come from a terribly long way away as he stared at those three grinning faces. ‘I think you should watch your mouth, you son of a fucking whore.’

He was on his feet now, teeth gritted so tight together they felt like they might crack apart. The three smiles blinked and faded. Jezal felt Kaspas’s hand on his arm. ‘Come on, he only meant—’

Jezal ripped his arm away, seized the edge of the table and flung it over. Coins, cards, bottles, glasses, flew through the air and spilled out across the grass. He had his sword in his other hand, still sheathed luckily, leaning right down over Brint, spraying spit in his face. ‘Now you fucking listen to me, you little bastard!’ he snarled, ‘I hear anything more like that, anything, and you won’t have to worry about West!’ He pressed the grip of his steel into Brint’s chest. ‘I’ll carve you like a fucking chicken!’

The three men stared up at him, aghast, their mouths wide open, their astonishment at this sudden display of violence equalled only by Jezal’s own.

‘But—’ said Jalenhorm.

‘What?’ screamed Jezal, seizing a fistful of the big man’s jacket and dragging him half out of his chair. ‘What d’you fucking say?’

‘Nothing,’ he squeaked, his hands raised, ‘nothing.’ Jezal let him drop. The fury was draining fast. He had half a mind to apologise, but when he saw Brint’s ashen face all he could think of was ‘she strikes me as the willing type’.

‘Like! A! Fucking! Chicken!’ he snarled again, then turned on his heel and stalked off. Halfway to the archway he realised he had left his coat behind, but he could hardly go back for it now. He made it into the darkness of the tunnel, took a couple of steps down it then sagged against the wall, breathing hard and trembling as if he’d just run ten miles. He understood now what it meant to lose one’s temper, and no mistake. He had never even realised that

he had one before, but there could be no doubt now.

'What the hell was that about?' Brint's shocked voice echoed quietly down the tunnel, only just audible over the thumping of Jezal's heart. He had to hold his breath to hear.

'Damned if I know.' Jalenhorm, sounding even more surprised. There was the rattle and scrape of the table being put straight. 'Never knew he had such a temper.'

'I suppose he must have a lot to think about,' said Kaspas, uncertainly, 'what with the Contest and all ...'

Brint cut him off. 'That's no excuse!'

'Well they're close, aren't they? Him and West? What with all the fencing together and what have you, maybe he knows the sister or something . . . I don't know!'

'There is another explanation,' Jezal could hear Brint saying, voice tense as though he was about to deliver a punchline. 'Perhaps he's in love with her!' The three of them burst out laughing. It was a good joke alright. Captain Jezal dan Luthar, in love, and with a girl whose station in life was so far beneath his own. What a ridiculous idea! What an absurd notion! What a joke!

'Oh shit.' Jezal put his head in his hands. He didn't feel like laughing. How the hell had she done this to him? How? What was it about her? She was fine to look at, of course, and clever, and funny, and all those things, but that was no explanation. 'I cannot see her again,' he whispered to himself, 'I will not!' And he thumped his hand against the wall. His resolve was iron. It always was.

Until the next note came under his door.

He groaned and slapped the side of his head. Why did he feel like this? Why did he . . . he couldn't even bring himself to think the word . . . like her so much? Then it came to him. He knew why.

She didn't like him.

Those mocking half-smiles. Those sidelong glances he caught sometimes. Those jokes that went just a little too close to the bone. Not to mention the occasional examples of outright scorn. She liked his money, maybe. She liked his position in the world, of course. She liked his looks, undoubtedly. But, in essence, the woman despised him.

And he'd never had that feeling before. He had always just assumed that everybody loved him, had never really had cause to doubt he was a fine man, worthy of the highest respect. But Ardee didn't like him, he saw it now, and that made him think. Apart from the jaw, of course, and the money and the clothes, what was there to like?

She treated him with the contempt he knew he deserved. And he couldn't get enough of it. 'Strangest thing,' Jezal mumbled to himself, slouching miserably against the wall of the tunnel. 'Strangest thing.'

It made him want to change her mind.

The Seed

‘How are you, Sand?’ Colonel Glokta opened his eyes. It was dark in the room. Damn it, he was late!

‘Damn it!’ he shouted, shoving back the covers and leaping out of bed. ‘I’m late!’ He snatched up his uniform trousers, shoving his legs in, fumbling with his belt.

‘Don’t worry about that, Sand!’ His mother’s voice was half soothing, half impatient. ‘Where is the Seed?’

Glokta frowned over as he pushed his shirt in. ‘I’ve no time for this nonsense, mother! Why do you always think you know what’s best for me?’ He cast around him for his sword, but couldn’t see it. ‘We’re at war you know!’

‘We are indeed.’ The Colonel looked up, surprised. It was the voice of Arch Lector Sult. ‘Two wars. One fought with fire and steel, and another one beneath – an old war, long years in the making.’ Glokta frowned. How ever could he have mistaken that old windbag for his mother? And what was he doing in Glokta’s chambers in any case? Sitting in the chair at the foot of his bed, prattling about old wars?

‘What the hell are you doing in my chambers?’ growled Colonel Glokta, ‘and what have you done with my sword?’

‘Where is the Seed?’ A woman’s voice now, but not his mother’s. Someone else. He did not recognise it. He squinted against the darkness, straining to see who was in the chair. He could make out a vague outline, but the shadows were too deep to tell more.

‘Who are you?’ asked Glokta sternly.

‘Who was I? Or what am I?’ The figure in the chair shifted as it rose slowly, smoothly, from its seat. ‘I was a patient woman, but I am woman no more, and the grinding years have worn my patience thin.’

‘What do you want?’ Glokta’s voice quivered, reedy and weak as he backed away.

The figure moved, stepping through the shaft of moonlight from the window. A woman’s form, slender and graceful, but shadows stuck to the face. A sudden fear clawed at him and he stumbled back against the wall, raising his arm to fend the woman off.

‘I want the Seed.’ A pale hand snaked out and closed around his outstretched arm. A gentle touch, but cold. Cold as stone. Glokta trembled, gasped, squeezed shut his eyes. ‘I need it. You cannot know the need I have. Where is it?’ Fingers plucked at his clothes, quick and deft, seeking, searching, darting in his pockets, in his shirt, brushing his skin. Cold. Cold as glass.

‘The Seed?’ squeaked Glokta, half paralysed with terror.

‘You know what I speak of, broken man. Where is it?’

‘The Maker fell . . .’ he whispered. The words welled up, he knew not from where.

'I know it.'

'... burning, burning ...'

'I saw it.' The face was close enough for him to feel the breath upon his skin. Cold. Cold as frost.

'... he broke upon the bridge below ...'

'I remember it.'

'... they searched for the Seed ...'

'Yes . . .' whispered the voice, urgent in his ear, 'where is it?' Something brushed against his face, his cheek, his eyelid, soft and slimy. A tongue. Cold. Cold as ice. His flesh crawled.

'I don't know! They could not find it!'

'Could not?' Fingers closed tight around his throat, squeezing, crushing, choking the air from him. Cold. Cold as iron, and just as hard. 'You think you know pain, broken man? You know nothing!' The icy breath rasped in his ear, the icy fingers squeezed, squeezed. 'But I can show you! I can show you!'

Glokta screamed, thrashed, struggled. He fought his way up, stood for a dizzy instant, then his leg buckled and he plunged into space. The dark room tumbled around him and he crashed to the boards with a sickening crunch, his arm folded beneath him, his forehead cracking against the floor.

He struggled up, clawing at the leg of his bed, pushing himself against the wall, snorting for breath, staring wild-eyed towards the chair, yet barely able to look for fear. A bar of moonlight spilled through the window, cut across the rumpled bed-clothes and onto the polished wood of the seat. *Empty.*

Glokta cast around the rest of the room, eyes adjusting to the darkness, peering into every shadowy corner. *Nothing. Empty. A dream.*

And now, as the crazy hammering of his heart relaxed, as his ragged breathing slowed, the pain came on. His head thumped, his leg screamed, his arm was throbbing dully. He could taste blood, his eyes stung and wept, his guts heaved, sick and spinning. He whimpered, made an agonising hop towards the bed, then collapsed on the moonlit mattress, exhausted, wet with cold sweat.

There was an urgent knocking at the door. 'Sir? Are you alright?' Barnam's voice. The knocking came again. *No good. It is locked. Always locked, but I don't think I'll be moving. Frost will have to break it down.* But the door swung open, and Glokta shielded his eyes from the sudden ruddy glow of the old servant's lamp.

'Are you alright?'

'I fell,' mumbled Glokta. 'My arm ...'

The old servant perched on the bed, taking Glokta's hand gently and pushing up the sleeve of his night-shirt. Glokta winced, Barnam clicked his tongue. His forearm had a big pink mark across it, already beginning to swell and redden.

'I don't think it's broken,' said the servant, 'but I should fetch the surgeon, just in case.'

'Yes, yes.' He waved Barnam away with his good hand. 'Fetch him.'

Glokta watched the old servant hurry, stooped, out of the door, heard him creaking along the narrow corridor outside, down the narrow stairs. He heard the front door banging shut. Silence descended.

He looked over at the scroll he had taken from the Adeptus Historical, still rolled up tight on the dresser, waiting to be delivered to Arch Lector Sult. *The Maker fell burning. He broke upon the bridge below. Strange, how parts of the waking world stray into one's dreams. That damned Northman and his intruder. A woman, and cold. That'll be what set me off.*

Glokta rubbed his arm gently, pressing the sore flesh with his fingertips. *Nothing. Just a dream.* And yet something was niggling at him. He looked over at the back of the door. The key was still in the lock, shining orange in the light from the lamp. *Not locked, and yet I must have locked it. Must have. I always do.* Glokta looked back to the empty chair. *What did that idiot apprentice say? Magic comes from the Other Side. The world below. Hell.*

Somehow, at that moment, after that dream, it did not seem so difficult to believe. The fear was building in him again, now he was alone. He stretched out his good hand towards the chair. It took an age to get there, trembling, shaking. His fingers touched the wood. *Cool, but not cold. Not cold. There is nothing there.* He slowly withdrew his hand, cradled his pulsing arm. *Nothing. Empty.*

A dream.

‘What the hell happened to you?’

Glokta sucked sourly at his gums. ‘Fell out of bed.’ He scratched absently at his wrist through the dressing. Until a moment ago it had been throbbing like hell, but the sight in front of him had pushed the pain into the back of his mind. *I could be worse off. A lot worse.* ‘Not a pretty sight. Not at all.’

‘You’re damn right it’s not.’ Severard looked as disgusted as was possible with half his face covered. ‘I nearly puked when I first saw it. Me!’

Glokta peered down, frowning, at the tangled mess of butchery, supporting himself against a tree-trunk with one hand and pushing some of the ferns aside with the tip of his cane to get a better look. ‘Are we even sure it’s a man?’

‘Might be a woman. Human anyway. That’s a foot.’

‘Ah, so it is. How was it found?’

‘He found it.’ Severard nodded over towards a gardener: sat on the ground, pale-faced and staring, and with a small pool of drying vomit on the grass beside him. ‘In amongst the trees here, hidden in the bushes. Looks as if whatever killed it tried to hide it, but not long ago. It’s fresh.’ *It is indeed – barely any smell, and only a couple of flies have arrived. Very fresh, perhaps last night even.*

‘It might not have been found for days, except someone asked for one of these trees to be pruned. Blocking out the light or something. You ever see anything like this?’

Glokta shrugged. ‘In Angland, once, before you came. One of the convicts tried to escape. He made it a few miles, then succumbed to the cold. A bear made free with the corpse. That was quite a mess, though not near as bad as this one.’

‘I can’t see anyone freezing to death last night. It was hot as hell.’

‘Mmm,’ said Glokta. *If hell is hot. I’ve always thought it might be cold. Cold as ice.* ‘There are few bears within the Agriont in any case. Do we have any idea

as to the identity of this . . .’ he waved his cane towards the carcass ‘. . . person?’

‘None.’

‘Is anyone unaccounted for? Reported missing?’

‘Not that I’ve heard.’

‘So we have not the slightest idea even who our victim is? Why the hell are we taking an interest? Don’t we have a fake Magus to be watching?’

‘That’s just it. Their new quarters are right over there.’ Severard’s gloved finger pointed out a building not twenty strides away. ‘I was watching them when this came to light.’

Glokta raised an eyebrow. ‘I see. And you suspect some connection, do you?’ The Practical shrugged. ‘Mysterious intruders in the dead of night, gruesome murders on their very doorstep? Our visitors draw trouble like shit draws flies.’

‘Huh,’ said Severard, swatting a fly away with his gloved hand. ‘I looked into that other thing as well. Your bankers. Valint and Balk.’

Glokta looked up. ‘Really? And?’

‘And not a lot. An old house. Very old and very well respected. Their notes are good as gold among the merchants. They’ve got offices all across Midderland, Angland, Starikland, in Westport, in Dagoska. Even outside the Union. Powerful people, by all accounts. All kind of folk owe them money, I reckon. Strange thing though, no one seems ever to have met a Valint or a Balk. Who can tell with banks though, eh? They love secrets. You want me to dig any more?’

It could be dangerous. Very dangerous. Dig too far and we might be digging our own graves. ‘No. We’d better leave off. For now. Keep your ears open though.’

‘My ears are always open, chief. So who do you like for the Contest?’

Glokta glanced across at the Practical. ‘How can you think about that with this in front of you?’

The Practical shrugged. ‘It won’t do ’em any harm, will it?’ Glokta looked back at the mangled body. *I suppose it won’t, at that.* ‘So come on, you should know, Luthar or Gorst?’

‘Gorst.’ *I hope he carves the little bastard in two.*

‘Really? People say he’s a clumsy ox. Lucky is all.’

‘Well, I say he’s a genius,’ said Glokta. ‘In a couple of years they’ll all be fencing like him, if you can call it fencing. You mark my words.’

‘Gorst, eh? Maybe I’ll have a little bet.’

‘You do that. But in the meantime you’d better scrape this mess up and take it to the University. Get Frost to give you a hand, he’s got a strong stomach.’

‘The University?’

‘Well we can’t just leave it here. Some fashionable lady taking a turn in the park could get an awful shock.’ Severard giggled. ‘And I might just know of someone who can shed some light on this little mystery.’

‘This is quite an interesting discovery you’ve made, Inquisitor.’ The Adeptus Physical paused in his work and peered over at Glokta, one eye enormously magnified through his glittering eye-glass. ‘Quite a fascinating discovery,’ he muttered, as he returned to the corpse with his instruments: lifting, prodding, twisting, squinting down at the glistening flesh.

Glokta peered round the laboratory, his lip curling with distaste. Jars of many different sizes lined two of the four walls, filled with floating, pickled lumps of meat. Some of those floating things Glokta recognised as parts of the human body, some he did not. Even he felt slightly uncomfortable in amongst the macabre display. *I wonder how Kandelau came by them all? Do his visitors end up dismembered, floating in a dozen different jars? Perhaps I would make an interesting specimen?*

'Fascinating.' The Adeptus loosened the strap of his eye-glass and perched it on top of his head, rubbing at the pink ring it had left behind around his eye. 'What can you tell me about it?'

Glokta frowned. 'I came here to find out what *you* can tell *me* about it.'

'Of course, of course.' Kandelau pursed his lips. 'Well, er, as to the gender of our unfortunate friend, er . . . ' he trailed off.

'Well?'

'Heh heh, well, er, the organs that would allow one to make an easy determination are . . . ' and he gestured at the meat on the table, harshly lit under the blazing lamps ' . . . absent.'

'And that is the sum of your investigation?'

'Well, there are other things: a man's third finger is typically longer than his first, not necessarily so with a woman but, heh, our remnant does not have all the digits necessary to make such a judgement. As to gender, therefore, without the fingers, we are quite stumped!' He giggled nervously at his own joke. Glokta did not.

'Young or old?'

'Well, er, again that is quite difficult to determine, I am afraid. The, er,' and the Adeptus tapped at the corpse with his tongs, 'teeth here are in good condition and, heh, such skin as remains would appear to be consistent with a younger person but, er, this is really just, heh heh—'

'So what can you tell me about the victim?'

'Er, well . . . nothing.' And he smiled apologetically. 'But I have made some interesting discoveries as to the cause of death!'

'Really?'

'Oh yes, look at this!' *I would rather not.* Glokta limped cautiously over to the bench, peering down at the spot the old man was indicating.

'You see here? The shape of this wound?' The Adeptus prodded at a flap of gristle.

'No I do not see,' said Glokta. *It appears all to be one enormous wound to me.*

The old man leaned towards him, his eyes wide. 'Human,' he said.

'We know that it is human! This is a foot!'

'No! No! These teeth marks, here . . . they are human bites!'

Glokta frowned. 'Human . . . bites?'

'Absolutely!' Kandelau's beaming smile was quite at odds with the surroundings. *And with the subject matter, I rather think.* 'This individual was bitten to death by another person, and, heh heh, in all likelihood,' and he gestured triumphantly at the mess on his table, 'considering the incomplete nature of the remains . . . partially eaten!'

Glokta stared at the old man for a moment. *Eaten? Eaten? Why must every question answered raise ten more?* 'This is what you would have me tell the

Arch Lector?’

The Adeptus laughed nervously. ‘Well, heh heh, these are the facts, as I see them ...’

‘A person, unidentified, perhaps a man, perhaps a woman, either young or old, was attacked in the park by an unknown assailant, bitten to death within two hundred strides of the King’s palace and partially . . . eaten?’

‘Er . . .’ Kandelau gave a worried glance sideways towards the entrance. Glokta turned to look, and frowned. There was a new arrival there, one that he had not heard enter. A woman, standing in the shadows at the edge of the bright lamp-light with her arms folded. A tall woman with short, spiky red hair and a black mask on her face, staring at Glokta and the Adeptus through narrowed eyes. A Practical. *But not one I recognise, and women are quite a rarity in the Inquisition. I would have thought . . .*

‘Good afternoon, good afternoon!’ A man stepped briskly through the door: gaunt, balding, with a long black coat and a prim little smile on his face. An unpleasantly familiar man. *Goyle, damn him. Our new Superior of Adua, arrived at last. Great news.* ‘Inquisitor Glokta,’ he purred, ‘what an absolute pleasure it is to see you again!’

‘Likewise, Superior Goyle.’ *You bastard.*

Two other figures followed close behind the grinning Superior, making the glaring little room seem quite crowded. One was a dark-skinned, stocky Kantic with a big golden ring through his ear, the other was a monster of a Northman with a face like a stone slab. He almost had to stoop to cram himself through the doorway. Both were masked and dressed from head to toe in Practicals black.

‘This is Practical Vitari,’ chuckled Goyle, indicating the red-haired woman, who had flowed over to the jars and was peering into them, one at a time, tapping on the glass and making the specimens wobble. ‘And these are Practicals Halim,’ the Southerner sidled past Goyle and into the room, busy eyes darting here and there, ‘and Byre.’ The monstrous Northman gazed down at Glokta from up near the ceiling. ‘In his own country they call him the Stone-Splitter, would you believe, but I don’t think that would work here, do you Glokta? Practical Stone-Splitter, can you imagine?’ He laughed softly to himself and shook his head.

And this is the Inquisition? I had no idea the circus was in town. I wonder if they stand on each other’s shoulders? Or jump through flaming hoops?

‘A remarkably diverse selection,’ said Glokta.

‘Oh yes,’ laughed Goyle, ‘I have picked them up wherever my travels have taken me, eh my friends?’

The woman shrugged as she prowled around the jars. The dark-skinned Practical inclined his head. The towering Northman simply stood there.

‘Wherever my travels have taken me!’ chuckled Goyle, just as though everyone else had laughed with him. ‘And I have more besides! It’s been quite a time, I do declare!’ He wiped a tear of mirth from his eye as he moved towards the table in the centre of the room. It seemed that everything was a source of amusement to him, even the thing on the bench. ‘But what’s all this? A body, unless I’m quite mistaken!’ Goyle looked up sharply, his eyes sparkling. ‘A body? A death within the city? As Superior of Adua, surely that

falls within my province?’

Glokta bowed. ‘Naturally. I was not aware that you had arrived, Superior Goyle. Also, I felt that the unusual circumstances of this—’

‘Unusual? I see nothing unusual.’ Glokta paused. *What game is this chuckling fool playing?*

‘Surely you would agree that the violence here is . . . exceptional. ’

Goyle gave a flamboyant shrug. ‘Dogs.’

‘Dogs?’ asked Glokta, unable to let that one pass. ‘Domestic pets run mad, do you think, or wild ones which climbed over the walls?’

The Superior only smiled. ‘Whichever you like, Inquisitor. Whichever you like.’

‘I’m afraid it could not possibly be dogs,’ the Adeptus Physical began pompously to explain. ‘I was only just making clear to Inquisitor Glokta . . . these marks here, and on the skin here, do you see? These are human bites, undoubtedly . . .’

The woman sauntered away from the jars, closer and closer to Kandelau, leaning in towards him until her mask was only inches away from his beak of a nose. He slowly trailed off. ‘Dogs,’ she whispered, then barked in his face.

The Adeptus jumped away. ‘Well, I suppose I could have been mistaken . . . of course . . .’ He backed into the enormous Northman’s chest, who had moved with surprising speed to position himself directly behind. Kandelau turned slowly around, staring up with wide eyes.

‘Dogs,’ intoned the giant.

‘Dogs, dogs, dogs,’ hummed the southerner in a thick accent.

‘Of course,’ squeaked Kandelau, ‘dogs, of course, how foolish I’ve been!’

‘Dogs!’ shouted Goyle in delight, throwing his hands in the air. ‘The mystery is solved!’ To Glokta’s amazement, two of the three Practicals began politely to applaud. The woman stayed silent. *I never believed that I would miss Superior Kalyne, but suddenly I am overcome with nostalgia.* Goyle turned slowly round, bowing low. ‘My first day here, and already I warm to the work! You can bury this,’ he said, gesturing to the corpse and smiling broadly at the cringing Adeptus. ‘Best buried, eh?’ He looked over at the Northman. ‘Back to the mud, as you say in your country!’

The massive Practical showed not the slightest sign that anyone had spoken. The Kantic was standing there, turning the ring through his ear round and round. The woman was peering down at the carcass on the table, sniffing at it through her mask. The Adeptus Physical was backed up against his jars, sweating profusely.

Enough of this pantomime. I have work to do. ‘Well,’ said Glokta stiffly, limping for the door, ‘the mystery is solved. You don’t need me any more.’

Superior Goyle turned to look at him, his good humour suddenly vanished. ‘No!’ he hissed, furious little eyes nearly popping out of his head. ‘We don’t . . . need you . . . any more!’

Never Bet Against a Magus

Logen sat in the hot sun, hunched over on his bench, and sweated. The ridiculous clothes did not help with the sweating, or indeed with anything else. The tunic had not been designed to sit down in, and the stiff leather dug painfully into his fruits whenever he tried to move.

‘Fucking thing,’ he growled, tugging at it for the twentieth time. Quai looked hardly more comfortable in his magical garb – the glittering of the gold and silver symbols only served to make his face look the more ill and pallid, his eyes the more twitchy and bulging. He’d hardly spoken a word all morning. Of the three of them, only Bayaz appeared to be enjoying himself, beaming round at the surging crowds on the benches, the sunlight shining off his tanned pate.

They stood out among the heaving audience like well-rotted fruit, and seemed about as popular. Even though the benches were packed shoulder to shoulder a small, nervous space had built up around the three of them where no one would sit.

The noise was even more crushing than the heat and the crowds. Logen’s ears hummed with the din. It was the most he could do to keep from clamping his hands over them and throwing himself under the bench for cover. Bayaz leaned towards him. ‘Was this what your duels were like?’ He had to shout even though his mouth was barely six inches from Logen’s ear.

‘Huh.’ Even when Logen had fought Rudd Threetrees, when a good part of Bethod’s army had drawn up in a great half-circle to watch, shouting and screaming and hammering their weapons against their shields, when the walls of Uffrith above them had been crammed with onlookers, his audience had not been half this size, not half this noisy. No more than thirty men had watched him kill Shama Heartless, kill him then butcher him like a pig. Logen winced and flinched and hunched his shoulders higher at the memory of it. Cutting, and cutting, and licking the blood from his fingers, while the Dogman stared in horror and Bethod laughed and cheered him on. He could taste the blood now, and he shuddered and wiped his mouth.

There had been so many fewer people, and yet the stakes had been so much higher. The lives of the fighters, for one thing, and the ownership of land, of villages, of towns, the futures of whole clans. When he’d fought Tul Duru, no more than a hundred had watched, but perhaps the whole fate of the North had turned on that bloody half hour. If he’d lost then, if the Thunderhead had killed him, would things be the same? If Black Dow, or Harding Grim, or any of those others had put him in the mud, would Bethod have a golden chain now, and call himself a King? Would this Union be at war with the North? The thought made his head hurt. Even more.

‘You alright?’ asked Bayaz.

‘Mmm,’ Logen mumbled, but he was shivering, even in the heat. What were

all these people here for? Only to be amused. Few could've found Logen's battles very amusing, except Bethod, perhaps. Few others. 'This isn't like my fights,' he muttered to himself.

'What's that?' asked Bayaz.

'Nothing.'

'Uh.' The old man beamed around at the crowd, scratching at his short grey beard. 'Who do you think will win?'

Logen really didn't much care, but he reckoned that any distraction from his memories was welcome. He peered into the enclosures where the two fighters were getting ready, not far from where he was sitting. The handsome, proud young man they'd met at the gate was one of them. The other was heavy and powerful-looking, with a thick neck and a look almost bored.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know anything about this business.'

'What, you? The Bloody-Nine? A champion who fought and won ten challenges? The most feared man in the North? No opinion? Surely single combat is the same the world over!'

Logen winced and licked his lips. The Bloody-Nine. That was far in the past, but not far enough for his liking. His mouth still tasted like metal, like salt, like blood. Touching a man with a sword and cutting him open with one are hardly the same things, but he looked the two opponents over again. The proud young man rolled up his sleeves, touched his toes, swivelled his body this way and that, swung his arms round in quick windmills, watched by a stern old soldier in a spotless red uniform. A tall, worried-looking man handed the fighter two thin swords, one longer than the other, and he whisked them around before him in the air with impressive speed, blades flashing.

His opponent stood there, leaning against the wooden side of his enclosure, stretching his bull neck from side to side without much hurry, glancing round with lazy eyes.

'Who's who?' asked Logen.

'The pompous ass from the gate is Luthar. The one who's half asleep is Gorst.'

It was plain who the crowd preferred. Luthar's name could be heard often in the din, and whoops and claps greeted every movement of his thin swords. He looked quick, and deft, and clever, but there was something deadly in that big man's waiting slouch, something dark about his heavy-lidded eyes. Logen would rather have fought Luthar, for all his speed. 'I reckon Gorst.'

'Gorst, really?' Bayaz' eyes sparkled. 'How about a little bet?'

Logen heard a sharp suck of breath from Quai. 'Never bet against a Magus,' whispered the apprentice.

It didn't seem to make much difference to Logen. 'What the hell have I got to bet with?'

Bayaz shrugged. 'Well, let's just say for honour then?'

'If you like.' Logen had never had too much of that, and the little he did have he didn't care about losing.

'Bremer dan Gorst!' The scattered clapping was smothered by an avalanche of hisses and boos as the great ox shambled towards his mark, half-closed eyes on the ground, big, heavy steels dangling from his big, heavy hands. Between his short-cropped hair and the collar of his shirt, where his neck should have

been, there was nothing but a thick fold of muscle.

'Ugly bastard,' Jezal murmured to himself, as he watched him go. 'Damn idiot ugly bastard.' But his curses lacked conviction, even to his own ear. He had watched that man fight three bouts and demolish three good opponents. One of them had still to leave his sick bed a week later. Jezal had been training for the last few days specifically to counter Gorst's bludgeoning style: Varuz and West swinging big broom handles at him while he dodged this way and that. More than once one of them had made contact, and Jezal was still smarting from the bruises.

'Gorst?' offered the referee plaintively, doing his best to wheedle some applause from the audience, but they were having none of it. The boos only became louder, joined by jeers and heckling as Gorst took his mark.

'You clumsy ox!'

'Get back to your farm and pull a plough!'

'Bremer the brute!' and other such.

The people stretched back, and back, and back into obscurity. Everyone was there. Everyone in the world, it looked like. Every commoner in the city round the distant edges. Every gentleman, artisan and trader thronging the middle benches. Every noble man or woman in the Agriont towards the front, from fifth sons of high-born nobodies to the great magnates of the Open and Closed Councils. The Royal box was full: the Queen, the two Princes, Lord Hoff, the Princess Terez. The King even appeared to be awake for once, truly an honour, his goggling eyes staring around in amazement. Out there somewhere were Jezal's father and his brothers, his friends and fellow officers, his entire acquaintance, more or less. Ardee too, he hoped, watching . . .

All in all, it was quite an audience.

'Jezal dan Luthar!' bellowed the referee. The meaningless bibble-babble of the crowd surged into a storm of cheering, a thunderous wave of support. The cries and shouts rang and echoed around the arena, making Jezal's head throb.

'Come on, Luthar!'

'Luthar!'

'Kill the bastard!' and other such.

'Off you go, Jezal,' whispered Marshal Varuz in his ear, clapping him on the back and pushing him gently out towards the circle, 'and good luck!'

Jezal walked in a daze, the noise of the crowd punching at his ears until it seemed his head would split. The training of the last few months flashed through his mind. The running, the swimming, the work with the heavy bar. The sparring, the beam, the endless forms. The punishment, the study, the sweating and the pain. Just so he could stand here. Seven touches. The first to four. It all came down to this.

He took his mark opposite Gorst, and stared into those heavy-lidded eyes. They looked back, cool and calm, seeming almost to stare past him as though he wasn't there. That needled him and he pushed the thoughts out of his head and raised high his noble chin. He would not, *could* not, let this oaf get the better of him. He would show all these people his blood, and his skill, and his mettle. He was Jezal dan Luthar. He would win. It was an incontestable fact. He knew it.

‘Begin!’

The first cut sent him reeling, shattering his confidence, his poise, and nearly his wrist. He had been watching Gorst fence, of course, if you could call it that, so he knew the man would come out swinging, but nothing could have prepared him for that first shattering contact. The crowd gasped with him as he staggered back. All his carefully laid plans, all of Varuz’ carefully worded advice, vanished into air. He winced with pain and shock, his arm still vibrating from the force of that mighty blow, his ears still ringing from the crashing noise of it, his mouth hanging open, his knees wobbling.

It was hardly the most promising start, but the next chop followed hard after the first, flashing down with even greater power. Jezal leaped aside and slid away, trying to make room and give himself time. Time to work out some tactic, some trick to stem the pitiless tide of swinging metal. But Gorst was not about to give him time. He was already loosing another throaty growl, his long steel already begun on its next irresistible arc.

Jezal dodged where he could, blocked where he couldn’t, his wrists already aching from the ceaseless punishment. To begin with he hoped that Gorst would tire. No one could throw those great lumps of metal around for long the way that he was doing. Soon the fierce pace would take its toll on the big man and he would slow, and droop, and the heavy steels would lose their venom. Then Jezal would fight back doggedly, run his opponent ragged, and win. The crowd would crack the Agriont with their cheers. A classic tale of victory against the odds.

Only Gorst did not tire. The man was a machine. After a few minutes there was still not the slightest sign of weariness in those heavy-lidded eyes. There was barely any emotion of any kind that Jezal could see, during the rare moments when he dared to take his eyes away from the flashing swords. The big long steel swung, swung, swung in its brutal circles, and the short steel was always there to turn away such feeble efforts as Jezal could make in between, never faltering or dropping even an inch. The power of the blows did not decrease, the growls tore from Gorst’s throat with as much vigour as ever. The crowd were given nothing to cheer at, and merely muttered angrily. It was Jezal who began to feel his legs slowing, to feel the sweat springing out of his forehead, to feel his grip on his steels slipping.

He saw it coming from a mile away, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had backed off until he ran out of circle. He had blocked and parried until he lost the feeling in his fingers. This time, when he raised his aching arm and there was the crash of metal on metal, one tired foot slipped and he tumbled squawking from the ring, floundering on his side, his short steel spinning from his twitching fingers. His face slapped against the ground and he took a gritty mouthful of sand. It was a painful and embarrassing fall, but he felt too tired and too battered to be all that disappointed. He was almost relieved that the punishment was over, if only for a moment.

‘One to Gorst!’ shouted the referee. A light dusting of applause was crushed beneath hoots of derision, but the big man seemed scarcely to notice, shuffling back to his mark with his head down and already preparing for the next touch.

Jezal rolled slowly onto his hands and knees, flexing his aching hands and taking his time getting up. He needed a moment to breathe and make ready,

to think up some strategy. Gorst waited for him: big, silent, still. Jezal brushed the sand from his shirt, mind racing. How to beat him? How? He stepped cautiously back to his mark, raised his steels.

‘Begin!’

This time Gorst came out even harder, slashing away as if he was scything wheat, making Jezal dance around the circle. One blow passed so close to his left side that he could feel the wind from it on his cheek. The next missed him by a margin no greater on his right. Then Gorst flung a sideways sweep aimed at his head and Jezal saw an opening. He ducked beneath it, sure the blade tore at the hairs on top of his scalp. He closed the distance as the heavy long steel swung away, almost catching the referee in the face on the back-swing, leaving Gorst’s right side all but undefended.

Jezal lunged at the big bastard, sure he had finally got through, knowing he had made it one touch apiece. But Gorst caught the thrust on his short steel and forced it just wide, the guards of the two blades scraping then locking together. Jezal cut at him viciously with his short steel but somehow Gorst blocked that too, bringing up his other sword just in time, catching Jezal’s blade and holding it just short of his chest.

For a moment their four steels were locked together, hilts grating, their faces just a few inches apart. Jezal was snarling like a dog, teeth bared, the muscles of his face a rigid mask. Gorst’s heavy features showed little sign of effort. He looked like a man having a piss: involved in a mundane and faintly distasteful task that must simply be done with as quickly as possible.

For a moment their blades were locked together, Jezal pushing with every grain of strength, each hard-trained muscle flexing: legs straining against the ground, stomach straining to twist his arms, arms straining to push his hands, hands gripped around the hilts of his steels like grim death. Every muscle, every sinew, every tendon. He knew he had the better position, the big man was off balance, if only he could push him back a step . . . an inch . . .

For that moment their steels were locked together, then Gorst dipped his shoulder, and grunted, and flung Jezal away as a child might fling away a boring toy.

He tumbled back, mouth and eyes wide open with surprise, feet kicking at the dirt, all his attention focused on staying upright. He heard Gorst growl again, and was shocked to see the heavy long steel already curving through the air towards him. He was in no position to dodge, and there was no time anyway. He raised his left arm on an instinct, but the thick, blunted blade tore his short steel away like a straw on the wind and crashed into his ribs, hammering the breath from his body in a wail of pain that echoed round and round the silent arena. His legs crumpled under him and he sprawled out on the turf, limbs flopping, sighing like a split bellows.

This time there was not even the shadow of applause. The crowd roared their hatred, booing and hissing at Gorst for all they were worth as he trudged back to his enclosure.

‘Damn you, Gorst, you thug!’

‘Get up Luthar! Up and at him!’

‘Go home, you brute!’

‘You damn savage!’

Their hisses turned to half-hearted cheers as Jezal picked himself up off the grass, his whole left side pulsing. He would have screamed with the pain if he had any breath left in him. For all his effort, for all his training, he was utterly outclassed and he knew it. The thought of doing it all again next year made him want to vomit. He did his best to appear undaunted as he struggled back to his enclosure, but he could not help sagging down heavily in his chair when he got there, dropping his notched steels on the flags and gasping for breath.

West bent over him and pulled up his shirt to check the damage. Jezal peered down gingerly, half expecting to see a great hole caved in his side, but there was only an ugly red welt across his ribs, some bruising already coming up around it.

‘Anything broken?’ asked Marshal Varuz, peering over West’s shoulder.

Jezal fought back the tears as the Major probed his side. ‘I don’t think so, but damn it!’ West threw his towel down in disgust. ‘You call this the beautiful sport? Is there no rule against these heavy steels?’

Varuz shook his head grimly. ‘They all have to be the same length, but there’s no rule for the weight. I mean, why would anyone want heavy ones?’

‘Now we know, don’t we!’ snapped West. ‘Are you sure we shouldn’t stop this before that bastard takes his head off?’

Varuz ignored him. ‘Now look here,’ said the old Marshal, leaning down to talk in Jezal’s face. ‘It’s the best of seven touches! First to four! There’s still time!’

Time for what? For Jezal to get cut in half, blunted steels or no? ‘He’s too strong!’ Jezal gasped.

‘Too strong? No one’s too strong for you!’ But even Varuz looked doubtful. ‘There’s still time! You can beat him!’ The old Marshal tugged at his moustaches. ‘You can beat him!’

But Jezal noticed he did not suggest how.

Glokta was becoming worried he might choke, so convulsive was his laughter. He tried to think of something he would rather see than Jezal dan Luthar being smashed around a fencing circle, and failed. The young man winced as he just barely blocked a raking cut. He had not been handling his left side at all well since he took that blow in the ribs, and Glokta could almost feel his pain. *And my, my, how nice it is to feel someone else’s for a change.* The crowd sulked, silent and brooding as Gorst harried their favourite around with his brutal slashes, while Glokta spluttered giggles through his clenched gums.

Luthar was quick and flashy, and he moved well once he saw the steels coming. *A competent fighter. Good enough to win a Contest, no doubt, in a mediocre year. Quick feet, and quick hands, but his mind is not as sharp as it should be. As it needs to be. He is too predictable.*

Gorst was an entirely different proposition. He seemed to be swinging, and swinging, without a thought in his head. But Glokta knew better. *He has a whole new way of doing things. It was all jab, jab in my day. By next year’s Contest they’ll all be chopping away with these big, heavy steels.* Glokta wondered idly if he could have beaten Gorst, at his best. *It would have been a bout worth seeing anyway – a damn sight better than this mismatch.*

Gorst easily dealt with a couple of limp jabs, then Glokta winced and the crowd hissed as Luthar just barely parried another great butcher’s chop, the

force of it nearly lifting him off his feet. He had no way to avoid the next swing, pressed against the edge of the circle as he was, and he was forced to jump back into the sand.

‘Three to nothing!’ shouted the referee.

Glokta shook with merriment as he watched Luthar chop at the ground in frustration, sending up a petulant spray of sand, his face a picture of pale self-pity. *Dear me, Captain Luthar, it will be four to nothing. A whitewash. An embarrassment. Perhaps this will teach that whining little shit some humility. Some men are better off for a good beating. Only look at me, eh?*

‘Begin!’

The fourth touch began precisely as the third had ended. *With Luthar taking a hammering.* Glokta could see it, the man was out of ideas. His left arm was moving slowly, painfully, his feet looked heavy. Another numbing blow crashed against his long steel, making him stumble back towards the edge of the circle, off-balance and gasping. Gorst needed only to press his attack a little further. *And something tells me he is not the man to let up when he’s ahead.* Glokta grabbed his cane, pushed himself to his feet. Anyone could see it was all over, and he had no wish to be caught in the crush as the disappointed crowds all tried to leave at once.

Gorst’s heavy long steel flashed down through the air. *The final blow, surely.* Luthar’s only choice was to try and block it and be knocked clean out of the circle. *Or it might just split his fat head. We can hope for that.* Glokta smiled, half turned to leave.

But out of the corner of his eye, somehow, he saw the cut miss. Gorst blinked as his heavy long steel thudded into the turf, then grunted as Luthar caught him across the leg with a left-handed cut. It was the most emotion he had shown all day.

‘One to Luthar!’ shouted the referee after a brief pause, unable to entirely keep the amazement out of his voice.

‘No,’ murmured Glokta to himself, as the crowd around him erupted into riotous applause. *No.* He had fought hundreds of touches in his youth, and watched thousands more, but he had never seen anything quite like that, never seen anyone move so quickly. Luthar was a good swordsman, he knew it. *But no one is that good.* He frowned as he watched the two finalists come out from their second break and take their marks.

‘Begin!’

Luthar was transformed. He harried Gorst with furious, lightning jabs, giving him no time to get started. It was the big man now who seemed stretched to the limit: blocking, dodging, trying to stay out of reach. It was as though they had sneaked the old Luthar away in the break and replaced him with a different man altogether: a stronger, faster, far more confident twin brother.

So long denied something to cheer for, the crowd whooped and yelled as though they’d split their throats. Glokta did not share their enthusiasm. *Something is wrong here. Something is wrong.* He glanced across the faces nearby, but no one else had sensed anything amiss. They only saw what they wanted to see: Luthar giving the ugly brute a spectacular and well-deserved thrashing. Glokta’s eyes scanned across the benches, not knowing what he was

looking for.

Bayaz, so-called. Sitting near the front, leaning forward and staring at the two fighters with fixed concentration, his 'apprentice' and the scarred Northman beside him. No one else noticed it, everyone was intent on the fighters before them, but Glokta did. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. *Something wrong.*

'Say one thing for the First of the Magi, say he's a cheating bastard,' growled Logen.

Bayaz had a little smile at the corner of his mouth as he mopped the sweat from his forehead. 'Who ever said he wasn't?'

Luthar was in trouble again. Bad trouble. Each time he blocked one of those heavy sweeps, his swords snapped back further, his grip seemed slacker. Each time he dodged, he ended up a little further back towards the edge of the yellow circle.

Then, when the end seemed certain, out of the corner of his eye, Logen saw the air above Bayaz' shoulders shimmer, as it had on the road south when the trees burned, and he felt that strange tugging at his guts.

Luthar seemed suddenly to find new vigour. He caught the next great blow on the grip of his short sword. A moment before, it might easily have sent the thing flying from his hand. Now he held it there for an instant, then flung it away with a cry, pushing his opponent off balance and jumping forward, suddenly on the attack.

'If you were caught cheating in a Northern duel,' growled Logen, shaking his head, 'they'd cut the bloody cross into your stomach and pull your guts out.'

'Lucky for me,' murmured Bayaz through gritted teeth, without taking his eyes away from the fighters, 'that we are in the North no longer.' Sweat was already beading his bald scalp again, running down his face in fat drops. His fists were clenched tight and trembling with effort.

Luthar struck furiously, again and again, his swords a flashing blur. Gorst grunted and growled as he turned the blows away, but Luthar was too quick for him now, and too strong. He drove him mercilessly across the circle like a crazy dog might drive a cow.

'Fucking cheating,' growled Logen again, as Luthar's blade flashed and left a bright red line across Gorst's cheek. A few drops of blood spattered across into the crowd on Logen's left, and they exploded into riotous cheering. That, just for a moment, was a shadow of his own duels. The referee's cry of three apiece could hardly be heard at all. Gorst frowned slightly and touched one hand to his face.

Above the din, Logen could just hear Quai's whisper. 'Never bet against a Magus ...'

Jeza knew that he was good, but he had never dreamed he could be *this* good. He was sharp as a cat, nimble as a fly, strong as a bear. His ribs no longer hurt, his wrists no longer hurt, all trace of tiredness had left him, all trace of doubt. He was fearless, peerless, unstoppable. The applause thundered around him and yet he could hear every word of it, see every detail of every face in the crowd. His heart was pumping tingling fire instead of blood, his lungs were sucking in the very clouds.

He did not bother even to sit in the break, so great was his eagerness to get back into the circle. The chair was an insult to him. He was not listening to what Varuz and West were saying. They were of no importance. Little people, far below. They stared at him: flushed, amazed, as well they might be.

He was the greatest swordsman ever.

That cripple Glokta could not have known how right he was: Jezal had only to try, it seemed, and he could have anything he wanted. He chuckled as he danced back to the mark. He laughed as he heard the crowds cheer. He smiled at Gorst as he stepped back into the circle. All was precisely as it should be. Those eyes were still heavy-lidded, lazy above the little red cut that Jezal had given him, but there was something else there now as well: a trace of shock, of wariness, of respect. As well there might be.

There was nothing that Jezal could not do. He was invincible. He was unstoppable. He was . . .

‘Begin!’

. . . completely lost. The pain lanced through his side and made him gasp. Suddenly he was afraid, and tired, and weak again. Gorst growled and unleashed his savage cuts, jarring the steels in Jezal’s hands, making him jump like a frightened rabbit. The mastery was gone, the anticipation, the nerve, and Gorst’s onslaught was more brutal than ever. He felt a terrible lurch of despair as his long steel was torn from his buzzing fingers, flew through the air and clattered into the barrier. Jezal was bludgeoned to his knees. The crowd gasped. It was all over . . .

. . . It was not over. The blow was arcing down towards him. The final blow. It seemed to drift. Slow, slow, as though through honey. Jezal smiled. It was a simple matter for him to push it away with his short steel. The strength flowed again. He sprang upwards, shoved Gorst away with his empty hand, flicked another swing aside, and then another, his one sword doing the work of two with time to spare. The arena was breathless silent but for the rapid clashing of the steels. Right and left, right and left went the short blade, flashing faster than his eye could follow, faster than his mind could think, seeming almost to be dragging him along behind it.

There was a squeal of metal on metal as it tore Gorst’s notched long steel from his hand, then another as it flickered across and did the same with his short. For a moment, all was still. The big man, disarmed and with his heels on the very edge of the circle, looked up at Jezal. The crowd was silent.

Then Jezal slowly lifted his short steel, all of a sudden seeming to weigh a ton, and poked Gorst gently in the ribs with it.

‘Huh,’ said the big man quietly, raising his eyebrows.

Then the crowd exploded into deafening applause. The noise went on and on, rising and rising, washing over Jezal in waves. Now that it was finished he felt drained beyond description. He closed his eyes, swaying, his sword dropped from his nerveless fingers and he sank to his knees. He was beyond exhaustion. It was as though he had used a whole week’s energy in a few moments. Even kneeling was an effort he was not sure he could sustain for long, and if he fell he was not sure he could ever get up again.

But then he felt strong hands taking him under the arms, and felt himself being lifted. The noise of the crowd grew even louder as he was hoisted into

the air. He opened his eyes – bleary, blurry colour flashed in front of him as he was turned around. His head rang with the sound. He was up on someone's shoulders. A shaved head. Gorst. The big man had lifted him up, as a father might lift his child, displaying him to the crowd, smiling up at him with a big, ugly grin. Jezal smiled back despite himself. It was a strange moment, all in all.

'Luthar wins!' cried the referee pointlessly, barely audible. 'Luthar wins!'

The cheering had resolved itself into a steady chant of 'Luthar! Luthar! Luthar!' The arena shook with it. Jezal's head swam with it. It was like being drunk. Drunk on victory. Drunk on yourself.

Gorst lowered him back to the circle as the cheering of the crowd began to fade. 'You beat me,' he said, smiling wide. His voice was strangely high and soft, almost like a woman's. 'Fair and square. I'd like to be the first to congratulate you.' And he nodded his big head and smiled again, rubbing at the cut under his eye without the slightest bitterness. 'You deserve it,' he said, holding out his hand.

'Thank you.' Jezal flashed a sour smile and gave the man's big paw as cursory a squeeze as possible, then he turned away towards his enclosure. Of course he fucking deserved it, and he was damned if he would let that bastard bask in his reflected glory a moment longer.

'Bravely done, my boy, bravely done!' frothed Marshal Varuz, slapping him on the shoulder as he stumbled back to his chair on wobbly legs. 'I knew you could do it!'

West grinned as he handed him the towel. 'They'll be talking about this for years.'

Other well-wishers crowded in, offering their congratulations, leaning over the barrier. A whirl of smiling faces, and in amongst them the face of Jezal's father, shining with pride. 'I knew that you could do it, Jezal! I never doubted! Not for a minute! You've brought honour to our family!' Jezal noticed that his elder brother didn't look all that pleased about it, though. He had the usual stodgy, envious expression on his face, even at Jezal's moment of victory. The stodgy, envious bastard. Could he not be happy for his brother, if only for one day?

'May I too congratulate the winner?' came a voice from over his shoulder. It was that old idiot, the one from the gate, the one whom Sulfur had called his master. The one who had used the name Bayaz. He had sweat on his bald skull, a lot of it. His face was pale, his eyes sunken. Almost as if he had just done seven touches with Gorst. 'Well done indeed, my young friend, an almost . . . magical performance.'

'Thank you,' muttered Jezal. He was not at all sure who this old man was, or what he was after, but he did not trust him in the least. 'I am sorry though, I must—'

'Of course. We will talk later.' He said it with a disturbing finality, as if it were a thing already arranged. Then he turned away and vanished smoothly into the crowds. Jezal's father stared after him, ashen-faced now, as though he had seen a ghost.

'Do you know him, father?'

'I ...'

‘Jezal!’ Varuz grabbed his arm excitedly. ‘Come! The King wishes to congratulate you!’ He dragged Jezal from his family and towards the circle. A scattering of applause rose up again as they walked together across the dry grass, the scene of Jezal’s victory. The Lord Marshal slung a fatherly arm around his shoulder, and smiled up at the crowds as though the applause was all for him. Everyone wanted a piece of his glory, it seemed, but Jezal was able to shake the old man off as he mounted the steps of the royal box.

Prince Raynault, youngest son of the King, was first in line, humbly dressed, honest and thoughtful-seeming, scarcely looking like royalty at all. ‘Well done!’ he shouted over the roar of the crowd, sounding truly delighted for Jezal’s victory. ‘Well done indeed!’ His older brother was more exuberant.

‘Incredible!’ shouted Crown Prince Ladisla, the sunlight glinting off the golden buttons on his white jacket. ‘Capital! Amazing! Spectacular! I never saw such a thing!’ Jezal grinned and bowed humbly as he went past, hunching his shoulders as the Crown Prince slapped him somewhat too hard on the back. ‘I always knew you’d do it! You were always my man!’

The Princess Terez, only daughter of the Grand Duke Orso of Talins, watched Jezal pass with a tiny, disdainful smile, tapping two languid fingers against her palm in a quarter-hearted imitation of clapping. Her chin was raised painfully high, as though just to be looked at by her was an honour he could never fully appreciate, and certainly did not deserve.

And so he came at last to the high seat of Guslav the fifth, High King of the Union. His head was slumped sideways, squashed down under the sparkling crown. His pasty pale fingers twitched on his crimson silk mantle like white slugs. His eyes were closed, chest rising and falling gently, accompanied by gentle splutterings as spittle issued from his slack lips and ran down his chin, joining the sweat on his bulging jowls and helping it to turn his high collar dark with wet.

Truly, Jezal was in the presence of greatness.

‘Your Majesty,’ murmured Lord Hoff. The head of state did not respond. His wife the Queen looked on, painfully erect, a fixed, emotionless smile plastered across her well-powdered face.

Jezal hardly knew where to look, and settled on his dusty shoes. The Lord Chamberlain coughed loudly. A muscle twitched beneath the sweaty fat on the side of the King’s face, but he did not wake. Hoff winced, and, glancing around to make sure no one was watching too closely, jabbed the royal ribs with his finger.

The King jumped, eyelids suddenly flicking wide open, heavy jowls wobbling, staring at Jezal with wild, bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes.

‘Your Majesty, this is Captain . . .’

‘Raynault!’ exclaimed the King, ‘my son!’

Jezal swallowed nervously, doing his best to maintain a rigid smile of his own. The senile old fool had mistaken him for his younger son. Worse yet, the Prince himself was standing not four paces away. The Queen’s wooden grin twitched slightly. Princess Terez’ perfect lips twisted with scorn. The Lord Chamberlain gave an awkward cough. ‘Er, no, your Majesty, this is ...’

But it was too late. Without any warning, the monarch struggled to his feet and folded Jezal in an enthusiastic embrace, his heavy crown slipping over to

one side of his head and one of its jewel-encrusted prongs nearly poking Jezal in the eye. Lord Hoff's jaw opened silently. The two Princes goggled. Jezal could only manage a helpless gurgle.

'My son!' blubbered the King, his voice choked with emotion. 'Raynault, I'm so glad you're back! When I am gone, Ladisla will need your help. He is so weak, and the crown is such a heavy weight! You were always the better suited for it! Such a heavy weight!' he sobbed into Jezal's shoulder.

It was like a hideous nightmare. Ladisla and the real Raynault gawped at each other, then back at their father, both looking sick. Terez was sneering down her nose at her prospective father-in-law with undisguised contempt. From bad to much, much worse. What the hell did one do in such a situation? Could there possibly be any etiquette devised for this? Jezal patted his King awkwardly on his fat back. What else could he do? Shove the senile old idiot over on his arse, with half of his subjects looking on? He was almost tempted to do it.

It was a small mercy that the crowds took the King's embrace for a ringing endorsement of Jezal's fencing abilities, and drowned out his words with a fresh wave of cheering. No one beyond the royal box heard what he said. They all missed the full significance of what was, without doubt, the most embarrassing moment of Jezal's life.

The Ideal Audience

Arch Lector Sult was standing by his huge window when Glokta arrived, tall and imposing as always in his spotless white coat, gazing out across the spires of the University towards the House of the Maker. A pleasant breeze was washing through the great circular room, ruffling the old man's shock of white hair and making the many papers on his enormous desk crackle and flutter.

He turned as Glokta shuffled into the room. 'Inquisitor,' he said simply, holding out his white gloved hand, the great stone on his ring of office catching the bright sunlight from the open window and glittering with purple fire.

'I serve and obey, your Eminence.' Glokta took the hand in his, and grimaced as he bent down to kiss the ring, his cane trembling with the effort of keeping upright. *Damn it if the old bastard doesn't hold his hand a little lower every time, just to watch me sweat.*

Sult poured himself into his tall chair in one smooth motion, elbows on the table top, fingers pressed together before him. Glokta could only stand and wait, his leg burning from the familiar climb through the House of Questions, sweat tickling his scalp, and wait for the invitation to sit.

'Please be seated,' murmured the Arch Lector, then waited while Glokta winced his way into one of the lesser chairs at the round table. 'Now tell me, has your investigation met with any success?'

'Some. There was a disturbance at our visitors' chambers the other night. They claim that—'

'Plainly an attempt to add credence to this outrageous story. Magic!' Sult snorted his disdain. 'Have you discovered how the breach in the wall was really made?'

Magic, perhaps? 'I am afraid not, Arch Lector.'

'That is unfortunate. Some proof of how this particular trick was managed might be of use to us. Still,' and Sult sighed as though he had expected no better, 'one cannot have everything. Did you speak to these . . . people?'

'I did. Bayaz, if I may use the name, is a most slippery talker. Without the aid of anything more persuasive than the questions themselves, I could get nothing from him. His friend the Northman also bears some study.'

One crease formed across Sult's smooth forehead. 'You suspect some connection with this savage Bethod?'

'Possibly.'

'Possibly?' echoed the Arch Lector sourly, as though the very word was poison. 'What else?'

'There has been a new addition to the merry band.'

'I know. The Navigator.'

Why do I even bother? 'Yes, your Eminence, a Navigator.'

'Good luck to them. Those penny-pinching fortune-tellers are always more

trouble than they're worth. Blubbering on about God and what have you. Greedy savages.'

'Absolutely. More trouble than they're worth, Arch Lector, though it would be interesting to know why they have employed one.'

'And why have they?'

Glokta paused for a moment. 'I don't know.'

'Huh,' snorted Sult. 'What else?'

'Following their night-time visitation, our friends were relocated to a suite of rooms beside the park. There was a most grisly death a few nights ago, not twenty paces from their windows.'

'Superior Goyle mentioned this. He said it was nothing to concern myself about, that there was no connection with our visitors. I left the matter in his hands.' He frowned at Glokta. 'Did I make the wrong decision?'

Oh dear me, I need not think too long over this one. 'Absolutely not, Arch Lector.' Glokta bowed his head in deep respect. 'If the Superior is satisfied, then so am I.'

'Hmm. So what you are telling me is that, all in all, we have nothing.'

Not quite nothing. 'There is this.' Glokta fished the ancient scroll from his coat pocket and held it out.

Sult had a look of mild curiosity on his face as he took it and unrolled it on the table, stared down at the meaningless symbols. 'What is it?'

Hah. So you don't know everything. 'I suppose you could say that it's a piece of history. An account of how Bayaz defeated the Master Maker.'

'A piece of history.' Sult tapped his finger thoughtfully on the table top. 'And how does it help us?' *How does it help you, you mean?*

'According to this, it was our friend Bayaz who sealed up the House of the Maker.' Glokta nodded towards the looming shape beyond the window. 'Sealed it up . . . and took the key.'

'Key? That tower has always been sealed. Always. As far as I am aware there is not even a keyhole.'

'Those were precisely my thoughts, your Eminence.'

'Hmm.' Slowly, Sult began to smile. 'Stories are all in how you tell them, eh? Our friend Bayaz knows that well enough, I dare say. He would use our own stories against us, but now we switch cups with him. I enjoy the irony.' He picked up the scroll again. 'Is it authentic?'

'Does it matter?'

'Of course not.' Sult rose gracefully from his chair and paced slowly over to the window, tapping the rolled-up scroll against his fingers. He stood there for some time, staring out. When he turned, he had developed a look of the deepest self-satisfaction.

'It occurs to me that there will be a feast tomorrow evening, a celebration for our new champion swordsman, Captain Luthar.' *That cheating little worm.* 'The great and the good will be in attendance: the Queen, both Princes, most of the Closed Council, several leading noblemen.' *Not forgetting the King himself. It has come to something when his presence at dinner is not even worth mentioning.* 'That would be the ideal audience for our little unmasking, don't you think?'

Glokta cautiously bowed his head. 'Of course, Arch Lector. The ideal

audience.' *Providing it works. It might be an embarrassing audience to fail in front of.*

But Sult was already anticipating his triumph. 'The perfect gathering, and just enough time to make the necessary arrangements. Send a messenger to our friend the First of the Magi, and let him know that he and his companions are cordially invited to a dinner tomorrow evening. I trust that you will attend yourself?'

Me? Glokta bowed again. 'I would not miss it for anything, your Eminence.'

'Good. Bring your Practicals with you. Our friends might become violent when they realise the game is up. Barbarians of this sort, who can tell what they might be capable of?' A barely perceptible motion of the Arch Lector's gloved hand indicated that the interview was finished. *All those stairs, just for this?*

Sult was looking down his nose at the scroll as Glokta finally reached the threshold. 'The ideal audience,' he was muttering, as the heavy doors clicked shut.

In the North, a chieftain's own Carls ate with him every night in his hall. The women brought the food in wooden bowls. You'd stab the lumps of meat out with a knife and with a knife you'd cut them up, then you'd stuff the bits in your mouth with your fingers. If you found some bone or gristle you'd toss it down on the straw for the dogs. The table, if there was one, was a few slabs of ill-fitting wood, stained and gouged and scarred from having knives stuck in it. The Carls sat on long benches, with maybe a chair or two for the Named Men. It'd be dark, especially in the long winters, and smoky from the fire-pit and the chagga pipes. There'd often be singing of songs, usually shouting of good-natured insults, sometimes screaming of bad-natured ones, and always a lot of drink. The only rule was that you waited for the chief to begin.

Logen had no idea what the rules might be here, but he guessed there were a lot.

The guests were sat round three long tables set out in a horseshoe, sixty people or more. Everyone had their own chair, and the dark wood of the table tops was polished to a high sheen, made bright enough for Logen to see the blurry outline of his face in by hundreds of candles scattered round the walls and down the tables. Every guest had at least three blunt knives, and several other things scattered about in front of them that Logen had no idea of the use for, including a big flat circle of shiny metal.

There was no shouting and certainly no singing, just a low murmur like a bee-hive as people muttered between themselves, leaning towards each other as if they were swapping secrets. The clothes were stranger than ever. Old men wore heavy robes of black, red and gold, trimmed with shining fur, even in the heat.

Young men wore tight fitting jackets in bright crimson, green, or blue, festooned with ropes and knots of gold and silver thread. Women were hung with chains and rings of glittering gold and flashing jewels, wearing strange dresses of vivid cloth that were ridiculously loose and billowing in places, painfully tight in others, and left others still entirely, distractingly bare.

Even the servants were dressed like lords, prowling around behind the

tables, leaning forward silently to fill goblets with sweet, thin wine. Logen had already drunk a deal of it, and the bright room had taken on a pleasant glow.

The problem was the lack of food. He hadn't eaten since that morning and his stomach was growling. He'd been eyeing the jars of plants sat on the tables before the guests. They had bright flowers on them, and didn't look much like food to him, but then they ate some strange things in this country.

There was nothing for it but to try. He snatched one of the things from the jar, a long piece of green plant with a yellow flower on the end. He took a nibble from the bottom of the stem. Tasteless and watery, but at least it was crunchy. He took a larger bite and munched on it without relish.

'I don't think they're meant for eating.' Logen glanced round, surprised to hear the Northern tongue spoken here, surprised that anyone was speaking to him at all. His neighbour, a tall, gaunt man with a sharp, lined face, was leaning towards him with an embarrassed smile. Logen recognised him vaguely. He'd been at the sword game – holding the blades for the lad from the gate.

'Ah,' mumbled Logen round his mouthful of plant. The taste of the stuff got worse with time. 'Sorry,' he said once he had forced it down his throat, 'I don't know much about these things.'

'Honestly, neither do I. How did it taste?'

'Like shit.' Logen held the half-eaten flower uncertainly in his fingers. The tiled floor was spotlessly clean. It hardly seemed right to toss the thing under the table. There were no dogs anyway, and even if there had been he doubted they'd have eaten the thing. A dog would have had more sense than him. He dropped it on the metal platter and wiped his fingers on his chest, hoping that no one had noticed.

'My name is West,' said the man, offering his hand, 'I come from England.'

Logen gave the hand a squeeze. 'Ninefingers. A Brynn, from way up north of the High Places.'

'Ninefingers?' Logen waggled his stump at him and the man nodded. 'Ah, I see.' He smiled as though remembering something funny. 'I heard a song once, in England, about a nine-fingered man. What was he called now? The Bloody-Nine! That was it!' Logen felt his grin slipping. 'One of those Northern songs, you know the kind, all violence. He cut off heads by the cartload, this Bloody-Nine, and burned towns, and mixed blood with his beer and whatnot. That wasn't you, was it?'

The man was making a joke. Logen laughed nervously. 'No, no, I never heard of him,' but luckily West had already moved on.

'Tell me, you look like you've seen some battles in your time.'

'I've been in some scrapes.' It was pointless to deny it.

'Do you know of this one they call the King of the Northmen? This man Bethod?'

Logen glanced sideways. 'I know of him.'

'You fought against him in the wars?'

Logen grimaced. The sour taste of the plant seemed to be lingering in his mouth. He picked up his goblet and took a swallow. 'Worse,' he said slowly as he set it down. 'I fought for him.'

This only seemed to make the man more curious than ever. 'Then you know

about his tactics, and his troops. His way of making war?’ Logen nodded. ‘What can you tell me about him?’

‘That he’s a most cunning and ruthless opponent, with no pity or scruple in him. Make no mistake, I hate the man, but there’s been no war leader in his league since the days of Skarling Hoodless. He has that in him which men respect, or fear, or at least obey. He pushes his men hard, so he can make the field first and choose his own ground, but they march hard for him because he brings them victories. He’s cautious when he must be, and fearless when he must be, but neglects no detail. He delights in every trick of war – in setting traps and ambushes, in mounting feints and deceptions, in sending sudden raids against the unwary. Look for him where you expect him least, and expect him to be strongest where he seems the weakest. Beware him most of all when he seems to run. Most men fear him, and those that don’t are fools.’

Logen picked up the flower from the plate and started snapping it into pieces. ‘His armies are grouped about the chieftains of the clans, some of them strong war leaders in their own right. Most of his fighters are Thralls, peasants pressed into service, lightly armed with spear or bow, fast moving in loose groups. In the past they were ill-trained, and taken from their farms for only a short time, but the wars have been raging for so long that many of them have become hard fighters, and show scant mercy.’

He began to arrange the bits of plant, imagining they were groups of men and the plate a hill. ‘Each chieftain keeps Carls besides, his own household warriors, well armed and armoured, skilled with axe and sword and spear, well disciplined. Some few have horses, but Bethod will keep those out of sight, waiting for the best moment to charge or pursue.’ He pulled the yellow petals from the flower, and they became horsemen hidden on the flanks. ‘Last there are the Known Men, the Named Men, those warriors who’ve earned great respect in battle. They might lead groups of Carls on the field, or act as scouts or raiders, sometimes far in the enemy’s rear.’

He realised the plate was covered with a mess of broken pieces of plant, and brushed them hurriedly off onto the table. ‘That’s the tradition of war in the North, but Bethod’s always had a fancy for new ideas. He’s read books, and studied other ways of fighting, and often talked of buying flat-bows, and heavy armour, and strong war-horses from the southern traders, and of making an army to be feared throughout the world.’

Logen became aware he had been talking solidly for ages. He hadn’t said half that many words together in years, but West was staring at him with a look of rapt attention. ‘You speak like a man who knows his business.’

‘Well, you’ve happened upon the one subject on which I might be reckoned an expert.’

‘What advice would you give to a man who had to fight a war against Bethod?’

Logen frowned. ‘Be careful. And watch your back.’

Jeza was not enjoying himself. At first, of course, it had seemed a delightful idea, just the thing he had always dreamed of: a celebration in *his* honour, attended by so many of the Union’s greatest. Surely it was only the start of his wonderful new life as a champion of the Contest. The great things which everyone had predicted, no, promised for him were almost arrived, poised like

over-ripe fruit to drop from the tree and into his lap. Promotions and glory were sure to follow close behind. Perhaps they would make him Major tonight, and he would go to the war in Angland as commander of a full battalion . . .

But, strangely, it appeared that most of the guests were more interested in their own affairs. They chattered to each other about government matters, about the business of merchant houses, about issues of land, and title, and politics. Fencing, and his remarkable skill at it, were scarcely mentioned. No immediate promotion had been forthcoming. He simply had to sit there, and smile, and accept the odd lukewarm congratulation from strangers in splendid clothes who barely even looked him in the eye. A wax effigy could have done the same job. He had to admit, the adulation of the commoners in the arena had been considerably more gratifying. At least they had sounded as if they meant it.

Still, he had never before been within the palace compound, a fortress within the fortress of the Agriont where few indeed were permitted to tread. Now he was seated at the top table in the King's own dining hall, though Jezal did not doubt that his Majesty took the majority of his meals propped up in bed, and most likely had them fed to him with a spoon.

There was a stage set into the wall at the far end of the room. Jezal had once heard that Ostus, the child King, had jesters perform for him at every meal. Morlic the Mad, by contrast, had staged executions there to go with his dinner. King Casamir, it was said, had likenesses of his worst enemies shout insults at him from that stage while he took his breakfast every morning, to keep his hatred for them fresh. The curtains were closed now, though. Jezal would have to look for his entertainment elsewhere, and in this regard the pickings were slim indeed.

Marshal Varuz prattled on in his ear. He, at least, was still interested in fencing. Unfortunately, he talked of nothing else. 'I never saw such a thing. The whole city is buzzing with it. Most remarkable bout that anyone's ever seen! I swear, you're better even than Sand dan Glokta used to be, and I never thought to see his like again! I never dreamed you had it in you to fight like that, Jezal, never had the slightest inkling!'

'Mmm,' said Jezal.

The Crown Prince Ladisla and his bride-to-be, Terez of Talins, made a dazzling couple at the top of the table, just beside the dozing King. They were oblivious to all that was going on around them, but hardly in the way that one might hope for from two young lovers. They were arguing viciously in scarcely hushed voices, while their neighbours studiously pretended not to suck in every word.

' . . . well I'll be going to war soon, in Angland, so you need not suffer me too much longer!' whined Ladisla. 'I might be killed! Perhaps that would make your Highness happy?'

'Pray don't die on my account,' returned Terez, her Styrian accent dripping venom, 'but if you must, you must. I suppose I will learn to bear the sorrow ...'

Somebody nearer at hand distracted Jezal by thumping on the table. 'Damn these commoners! Damn peasantry's up in arms in Starikland! Lazy dogs, they refuse to work a stroke!'

‘It’s these taxes,’ grumbled the man’s neighbour, ‘these war taxes have them all stirred up. Have you heard about this damn character they call the Tanner? Some bloody peasant, preaching revolution, open as you please! I heard that one of the King’s collectors was set on by a mob, not a mile outside the walls of Keln. One of the King’s collectors, I say! By a mob! Not a mile outside the city walls—’

‘We’ve damn well brought it on ourselves!’ The speaker’s face was out of sight but Jezal recognised him by the gold-embroidered cuffs on his gown. Marovia, the High Justice. ‘Treat a man like a dog and sooner or later he’ll bite you, it’s a simple fact. Our role as governors, and as noblemen, is surely to respect and protect the common man, rather than to oppress and scorn him?’

‘I wasn’t talking about scorn, Lord Marovia, or oppression, just about them paying what’s due to us as their landlords, and for that matter their natural betters ...’

Marshal Varuz, meanwhile, had not let up for an instant. ‘It was quite a thing, eh? The way you put him down, one steel against two!’ The old soldier swished his hand around in the air. ‘The whole town’s buzzing. You’re bound for great things now my boy, mark my words. Bound for great things. I’ll be damned if you don’t have my seat on the Closed Council one day!’

It really was too much. Jezal had put up with the man for all those months. He had somehow imagined that if he won that would be the end of it, but it seemed he would be disappointed in this, as in so much else. It was strange, but Jezal had never fully realised before what a boring old imbecile the Lord Marshal was. He was realising now though, and no mistake.

To further add to his dismay, there were several people seated about the tables who would most definitely not have been among his chosen guests. He supposed he could make a dispensation for Sult, the Arch Lector of the Inquisition, since he sat on the Closed Council and was without doubt a powerful figure, but Jezal could not comprehend why he might have brought that bastard Gloкта with him. The cripple looked even more ill than usual, twitching eyes sunken in dark circles. For some reason he was occasionally shooting grim and suspicious glances at Jezal as though he suspected him of some crime or other. It was a damn cheek, what with it being his feast and all.

Even worse, on the other side of the room was that old, bald man, the one who had called himself Bayaz. Jezal had still not got to the bottom of his strange words of congratulation at the Contest – or his father’s reaction to the man, for that matter. And he had his hideous friend, the nine-fingered barbarian, beside him.

Major West had the misfortune of being seated next to the primitive, but he was making the best of it; indeed, the two were engaged in a lively conversation. The Northman broke into sudden peals of laughter and thumped the table with his big fist, making the glasses rattle. At least they were enjoying themselves at his party, Jezal thought sourly, but he almost wished he was down there with them.

Still, he knew that he wanted to be a big, important man some day. To wear things with a lot of fur, and a heavy golden chain of office. To have people bow and scrape and fawn before him. He had made that decision long ago, and he supposed he still liked the idea. It was just that, up close, the whole

thing seemed so awfully false and boring. He would much, much rather have been on his own with Ardee, even though he had seen her the night before. There was nothing boring about her . . .

‘. . . the savages are closing on Ostenhorm, that’s what I heard!’ someone shouted over on Jezal’s left. ‘The Lord Governor, Meed, he’s raising an army and has sworn to turn them out of Angland!’

‘Hah. Meed? That swollen-headed old fool couldn’t turn a pie out of a dish!’

‘Enough to beat these Northern animals though, what? One good Union man’s worth ten of their kind ...’

Jezal heard Terez’ voice cutting suddenly shrill above the hubbub, almost loud enough to be heard at the far end of the room, ‘. . . of course I will marry where my father commands me, but I don’t have to like it!’ She appeared so vicious at that moment that he would not have been surprised to see her stab the Crown Prince in the face with her fork. Jezal felt somewhat gratified to see that he was not the only one who had trouble with women.

‘. . . oh yes, a remarkable performance! Everyone’s talking about it,’ Varuz was still droning.

Jezal squirmed in his chair. How long was this bloody business going to take? He felt suffocated. He glanced across the faces again and caught Glokta’s eye, staring at him with that grim, suspicious look on his wasted face. Jezal still couldn’t meet that gaze for long, his party or no. What the hell did the cripple have against him anyhow?

The little bastard. He cheated. Somehow. I know it. Glokta’s eyes tracked slowly across the table opposite until they lighted on Bayaz. The old fraud was sitting there, quite at home. *And he had some part in it. They cheated, together. Somehow.*

‘My lords and ladies!’ The chatter faded as the Lord Chamberlain rose to address the room. ‘I would like to welcome you all, on his Majesty’s behalf, to this humble gathering.’ The King himself stirred briefly, gazed vacantly about him, blinked, then closed his eyes. ‘We are gathered, of course, in honour of Captain Jezal dan Luthar, who has recently added his name to that most select roll of honour: those swordsmen who have been victorious at the summer Contest.’ A few glasses were raised and there were some half-hearted mumblings of agreement.

‘I recognise several other winners among the assembly here today, many of them now the holders of high office: Lord Marshal Varuz, Commander Valdis of the Knights Herald, Major West down there, now on Marshal Burr’s staff, of course. Even I was a winner in my day.’ He smiled and looked down at his bulging paunch. ‘Though my day was some time ago, of course.’ A polite ripple of laughter passed round the room. *I notice that I don’t get a mention. Not all winners are enviable, eh?*

‘Victors at the Contest,’ continued the Lord Chamberlain, ‘have so often gone on to great things. I hope, and indeed we all hope, that it may prove so for our young friend, Captain Luthar.’ *I hope he meets a slow death in Angland, the cheating little bastard.* But Glokta raised his glass along with everyone else to toast the arrogant ass, while Luthar sat there, loving every instant of it.

And to think. I sat in that very chair, being applauded and envied and clapped on the back after I won the Contest. Different men in the big clothes, different faces

sweating in the heat, but nothing very much has changed. Was my grin really any less smug? Of course not. If anything I was worse. But at least I earned it.

Such was Lord Hoff's commitment that he did not stop toasting until his goblet was entirely empty, then he shoved it back on the table and licked his lips. 'And now, before the food arrives, a small surprise has been prepared by my colleague Arch Lector Sult, in honour of another of our guests. I hope you will all find it diverting.' And the Lord Chamberlain sat heavily back down, holding his empty goblet out for more wine.

Glokta glanced across at Sult. *A surprise, from the Arch Lector? Bad news for somebody.*

The heavy red curtains of the stage rolled slowly back. They revealed an old man lying on the boards, his white garment daubed with colourful blood. A broad canvas behind depicted a forest scene beneath a starry sky. It reminded Glokta rather unpleasantly of the mural in the round room. The room beneath Severard's crumbling pile by the docks.

A second old man swept on from the wings: a tall, slender man with remarkably fine, sharp features. His head was shaved bald and he had grown a short white beard, but Glokta recognised him immediately. *Iosiv Lestek, one of the city's most respected actors.* He gave a mannered start as he noticed the bloody corpse.

'Oooooooh!' he wailed, spreading his arms wide in an actor's approximation of shock and despair. It was a truly enormous voice, loud enough to make the rafters shake. Confident that he had the undivided attention of the chamber, Lestek began to intone his lines, hands sweeping through the air, towering passions sweeping across his face.

So here, at last, my master Juvenis lies,

And with his death all hope of peace now dies,

By Kanedias' treachery undone.

His passing is the setting of the sun

Upon an age.

The old actor threw back his head, and Glokta saw tears sparkling in his eyes. *A neat trick, to cry on demand like that.* A lonely drop trickled slowly down his cheek, and the audience sat spellbound. He turned once again to the body.

Here brother murders brother. All slow time

Can never have recorded such a crime.

I half expect to see the stars go out.

Why does the ground not open up and spout

Some raging flame?

He threw himself down on his knees and beat upon his ageing breast.

Oh bitter fate, I would most happily

Now join my master, but it cannot be!

For when a great man dies, we that remain

Though in a narrowed world, must brave the pain

And struggle onward.

Lestek looked slowly up towards the audience, slowly clambered to his feet, his expression shifting from deepest sorrow to grimmest determination.

For though the Maker's house is locked and barred,

All carved from rock and steel, all wondrous hard,

If I must wait until that steel is rust,

Or with my bare hands crush that rock to dust,

I'll have my vengeance!

The actor's eyes flashed fire as he flicked out his robe and strode from the stage to rapturous applause. It was a condensed version of a familiar piece, often performed. *Although rarely so well.* Glokta was surprised to find himself clapping. *Quite the performance so far. Nobility, passion, command. A great deal more convincing than another fake Bayaz I could mention.* He sat back in his chair, easing his left leg out under the table, and prepared to enjoy the show.

Logen watched with his face screwed up in confusion. He guessed that this was one of the spectacles that Bayaz had spoken of, but his grip on the language wasn't good enough to catch the details.

They swept up and down the stage with much sighing and waving of their hands, dressed in bright costumes and speaking in some kind of chant. Two of them were supposed to be dark-skinned, he thought, but were clearly pale men with black paint on their faces. In another scene, the one playing Bayaz whispered to a woman through a door, seeming to plead with her to open it, only the door was a piece of painted wood stood up on its own in the middle of the stage, and the woman was a boy in a dress. It would have been easier, Logen thought, to step around the piece of wood and speak to him or her directly.

Logen was sure of one thing, though – the real Bayaz was seriously displeased. He could feel his annoyance mounting with each scene. It reached a teeth-grinding peak when the villain of the piece, a big man with a glove and an eye-patch, pushed the boy in the dress over some wooden battlements. It was plain that he or she was meant to have fallen a great distance, even though Logen could hear him hit something soft just behind the stage.

'How fucking dare they?' the real Bayaz growled under his breath. Logen would have got all the way out of the room if he could've, but he had to be content with shuffling his chair towards West, as far from the Magus' fury as possible.

On the stage, the other Bayaz was battling the old man with the glove and the eye-patch, although they fought by walking round in circles and talking a lot. Finally the villain followed the boy off the back of the stage, but not

before his adversary took an enormous golden key from him.

‘There’s more detail here than in the original,’ muttered the real Bayaz, as his counterpart held up the key and spouted some more verse. Logen was little further on when the performance came to a close, but he caught the last two lines, just before the old actor bowed low:

Pray your indulgence, at our story’s end,

Our humble purpose was not to offend.

‘My fucking old arse it wasn’t,’ hissed Bayaz through gritted teeth, while fixing a grin and clapping enthusiastically.

Glokta watched Lestek take a few last bows as the curtains closed on him, the golden key still shining in his hand. Arch Lector Sult rose from his chair as the applause died.

‘I am so glad you enjoyed our little diversion,’ he said, smiling smoothly round at the appreciative gathering. ‘I do not doubt that many of you have seen this piece before, but it has a special significance this evening. Captain Luthar is not the only celebrated figure in our midst, there is a second guest of honour here tonight. None other than the subject of our play – Bayaz himself, the First of the Magi!’ Sult smiled and held out his arm towards the old fake on the other side of the room. There was a gentle rustling as every guest turned from the Arch Lector to look at him.

Bayaz smiled back. ‘Good evening,’ he said. A few of the worthies laughed, suspecting some further little game perhaps, but Sult did not laugh with them and their merriment was short lived. An uneasy silence descended on the hall. *A deadly silence, perhaps.*

‘The First of the Magi. He has been with us in the Agriont now for several weeks. He and a few . . . companions.’ Sult glanced down his nose at the scarred Northman, and then back to the self-styled Magus. ‘Bayaz.’ He rolled the word around his mouth, allowing it to sink into his listeners’ ears. ‘The first letter in the alphabet of the old tongue. First apprentice of Juvens, first letter of the alphabet, is that not so, Master Bayaz?’

‘Why, Arch Lector,’ asked the old man, still smirking, ‘have you been checking up on me?’ *Impressive. Even now, when he must sense the game will soon be over, he sticks to his role.*

Sult was unmoved however. ‘It is my duty thoroughly to investigate anyone who might pose a threat to my King or country,’ he intoned stiffly.

‘How fearsomely patriotic of you. Your investigations no doubt revealed that I am still a member of the Closed Council, even if my chair stands empty for the time being. I believe *Lord* Bayaz would be the proper term of address.’

Sult’s cold smile did not slip even a hair’s breadth. ‘And when exactly was your last visit, *Lord* Bayaz? It would seem that someone so deeply involved in our history would have taken more of an interest over the years. Why, if I may ask, in the centuries since the birth of the Union, since the time of Harod the Great, have you not been back to visit us?’ *A good question. I wish it had occurred to me.*

‘Oh, but I have been. During the reign of King Morlic the Mad, and in the civil war which followed, I was tutor to a young man called Arnault. Later, when Morlic was murdered and Arnault was raised to the throne by the Open

Council, I served as his Lord Chamberlain. I called myself Bialoveld in those days. I visited again in King Casamir's reign. He called me Zoller, and I had your job, Arch Lector.'

Glokta could barely contain a gasp of indignation, and heard others from the chairs around him. *He has no shame, I'll give him that. Bialoveld, and Zoller, two of the Union's most respected servants. How dare he? And yet . . .* He pictured the painting of Zoller in the Arch Lector's study, and the statue of Bialoveld in the Kingsway. *Both bald, both stern, both bearded . . . but what am I thinking? Major West is thinning out on top. Does that make him a legendary wizard? Most likely this charlatan merely picked the two baldest figures he could find.*

Sult, meanwhile, was trying a different tack. 'Tell me this, then, Bayaz: it is a story well known that Harod himself doubted you when you first came to his hall, all those long years ago. As proof of your power, you broke his long table in two. It may be that there are some sceptics among us here tonight. Would you consider such a demonstration for us, now?'

The colder Sult's tone became, the less the old fraud seemed to care. He dismissed this latest effort with a lazy wave of his hand. 'What you speak of is not juggling, Arch Lector, or playing on the stage. There are always dangers, and costs. Besides, it would be a great shame to spoil Captain Luthar's feast simply so I could show off, don't you think? Not to mention the waste of a fine old piece of furniture. I, unlike so many others these days, have a healthy respect for the past.'

Some were smiling uncertainly as they watched the two old men fencing with each other, perhaps still suspecting an elaborate joke. Others knew better and were frowning hard, trying to work out what was going on, and who had the upper hand. High Justice Marovia, Glokta noticed, looked to be thoroughly enjoying himself. *Almost as if he knows something we don't.* Glokta shifted uncomfortably in his chair, eyes fixed on the bald actor. *Things are not going as well as they should be. When will he begin to sweat? When?*

Someone placed a bowl of steaming soup in front of Logen. No doubt it was meant to be eaten, but now his appetite was gone. Logen might be no courtier, but he could spot folk working up to violence when he saw them. With each exchange between the two old men their smiles slipped further, their voices became harder, the hall seemed to grow closer and more oppressive. Everyone in the room was looking worried now – West, the proud lad who'd won that sword game because of Bayaz' cheating, the feverish cripple who'd asked all the questions . . .

Logen felt the hairs on his neck rising. There were two figures lurking in the nearest doorway. Black-clothed figures, black-masked. His eyes flicked across to the other entrances. Each held two of those masked figures, two at least, and he didn't reckon they were here to collect the plates.

They were here for him. For him and Bayaz, he could feel it. A man doesn't put on a mask unless he's got some dark work in mind. There was no way that he could deal with half that many, but he slid a knife from beside his plate and hid it behind his arm anyway. If they tried to take him, he'd fight. That didn't need thinking about.

Bayaz was starting to sound angry. 'I have supplied you with all the proofs you've asked for, Arch Lector!'

‘Proofs!’ The tall man they called Sult gave a cold sneer. ‘You deal in words and dusty papers! More the business of a snivelling clerk than the stuff of legend! Some would say that a Magus without magic is simply a meddling old man! We are at war, and can take no chances! You mentioned Arch Lector Zoller. His diligence in the cause of truth is well documented. You, I am sure, must understand mine.’ He leaned forward, planting his fists firmly on the table before him. ‘Show us magic, *Bayaz*, or show us the key!’

Logen swallowed. He didn’t like the way that things were going, but then he didn’t understand the rules of this game. He had put his trust in Bayaz, for some reason, and there it would have to stay. It was a little late to be changing sides.

‘Have you nothing left to say?’ demanded Sult. He slowly lowered himself into his chair, smiling once more. His eyes slid over to the archways and Logen felt the masked figures moving forward, straining to be released. ‘Have you no more words? Have you no more tricks?’

‘Only one.’ Bayaz reached into his collar. He took hold of something there, and drew it out – a long, thin chain. One of the black-masked figures stepped forward a pace, expecting a weapon, and Logen’s hand gripped tighter on the handle of the knife, but when the chain came all the way out there was only a rod of dark metal dangling on the end of it.

‘The key,’ said Bayaz, holding it up to the candlelight. It barely shone at all. ‘Less lustre than the one in your play, perhaps, but the real thing, I assure you. Kanedias never worked with gold. He did not like pretty things. He liked things that worked.’

The Arch Lector’s lip curled. ‘Do you simply expect us to take your word for it?’

‘Of course not. It is your job to be suspicious of everyone, and I must say you do it exceptionally well. It does grow rather late however, so I will wait until tomorrow morning to open the House of the Maker.’ Someone dropped a spoon on the floor, and it clattered against the tiles. ‘There will need to be some witnesses present, of course, to make sure that I don’t try any sleight of hand. How about . . .’ Bayaz’ cool green eyes swept down the table. ‘Inquisitor Glokta, and . . . your new fencing champion, Captain Luthar?’

The cripple frowned as he was named. Luthar looked utterly bewildered. The Arch Lector sat, his scorn swapped for a stony blankness. He gazed from Bayaz’ smiling face to that gently swinging rod of dark metal, then back again. His eyes moved over to one of the doorways, and he gave a tiny shake of his head. The dark figures faded back into the shadows. Logen unclenched his aching teeth, then quietly slipped the knife back on to the table.

Bayaz grinned. ‘Dear me, Master Sult, you really are a hard man to please.’

‘I believe *your Eminence* is the proper term of address,’ hissed the Arch Lector.

‘So it is, so it is. I do declare, you really won’t be happy until I’ve broken some furniture. I would hate to spill everyone’s soup though, so . . .’ With a sudden bang, the Arch Lector’s chair collapsed. His hand shot out and grabbed at the table cloth as he plunged to the floor in a clattering mess of loose firewood, and sprawled in the wreckage with a groan. The King started awake, his guests blinked, and gasped, and stared. Bayaz ignored them.

‘This really is an excellent soup,’ he said, slurping noisily from his spoon.

The House of the Maker

It was a stormy day, and the House of the Maker stood stark and grim, a huge dark shape against the ragged clouds. A cold wind whipped between the buildings and through the squares of the Agriont, making the tails of Glokta's black coat flap around him as he shuffled after Captain Luthar and the would-be Magus, the scarred Northman at his side. He knew they were watched. *Watched the whole way. Behind the windows, in the doorways, on the roofs.* The Practicals were everywhere, he could feel their eyes.

Glokta had half expected, half hoped, that Bayaz and his companions would have disappeared in the night, but they had not. The bald old man seemed as relaxed as if he had undertaken to open a fruit cellar, and Glokta did not like it. *When does the bluff end? When does he throw his hands up and admit it's all a game? When we reach the University? When we cross the bridge? When we stand before the very gate of the Maker's House and his key does not fit?* But somewhere in the back of his mind the thought lurked: *What if it does not end? What if the door opens? What if he truly is as he claims to be?*

Bayaz chattered to Luthar as they strolled across the empty courtyard towards the University. *Every bit as much at ease as a grandfather with his favourite grandson, and every bit as boring.*

'... of course, the city is so much larger than when I last visited. That district you call the Three Farms, all teeming bustle and activity. I remember when that whole borough was three farms! Indeed I do! And far beyond the city walls!'

'Erm ...' said Luthar.

'And as for the Spicers' new guildhall, I never saw such ostentation ...'

Glokta's mind raced as he limped after the two of them, trawling for hidden meanings in the sea of blather, grasping for order in the chaos. The questions tumbled over each other. *Why pick me as a witness? Why not the Arch Lector himself? Does this Bayaz suppose that I can be easily fooled? And why Luthar? Because he won the Contest? And how did he win? Is he a part of this deception?* But if Luthar was party to some sinister plan, he was giving no sign. Glokta had never seen the slightest hint that he was anything other than the self-obsessed young fool he appeared to be.

And then we come to this puzzle. Glokta glanced sidelong at the big Northman. There were no signs of deadly intent on his scarred face, little sign that anything was going on in there at all. *Is he very stupid, or very clever? Is he to be ignored, or feared? Is he the servant, or the master?* There were no answers to any of it. Yet.

'Well, this place is a shadow of its former self,' said Bayaz as they halted outside the door to the University, raising an eyebrow at the grimy, tilting statues. He rapped briskly on the weathered wood and the door swayed on its hinges. To Glokta's surprise, it opened almost immediately.

'You're expected,' croaked the ancient porter. They stepped around him into the gloom. 'I will show you to—' began the old man as he wrestled the creaking door shut.

'No need,' called Bayaz over his shoulder, already striding briskly off down the dusty corridor, 'I know the way!' Glokta struggled to keep up, sweating despite the cold weather, leg burning all the way. The effort of maintaining the pace scarcely gave him time to consider how the bald bastard might be so familiar with the building. *But familiar he certainly is.* He swept down the corridors as though he had spent every day of his life there, clicking his tongue in disgust at the state of the place and prattling all the while.

'... I've never seen such dust, eh, Captain Luthar? I wouldn't be surprised if the damn place hadn't been cleaned since I was last here! I've no idea how a man can think under such conditions! No idea at all . . .' Centuries of dead and justly forgotten Adepts stared gloomily down from their canvases, as though upset by all the noise.

The corridors of the University rolled past, an ancient, dusty, forsaken-seeming place, with nothing in it but grimy old paintings and musty old books. Jezal had precious little use for books.

He had read a few about fencing and riding, a couple about famous military campaigns, once opened the covers on a great big history of the Union he found in his father's study, and got bored after three or four pages.

Bayaz droned on. 'Here we fought with the Maker's servants. I remember it well. They cried out to Kanedias to save them, but he would not come down. These halls ran with blood, rang with screams, rolled with smoke that day.'

Jezal had no idea why the old fool would single him out to tell his tall stories to, and still less how to reply. 'That sounds . . . violent.'

Bayaz nodded. 'It was. I am not proud of it. But good men must sometimes do violent things.'

'Uh,' said the Northman suddenly. Jezal had not been aware that he was even listening.

'Besides, that was a different age. A violent age. Only in the Old Empire were people advanced beyond the primitive. Midderland, the heart of the Union, believe it or not, was a sty. A wasteland of warring, barbaric tribes. The luckiest among them were taken into the Maker's service. The rest were painted-face savages, without writing, without science, with barely anything to separate them from the beasts.'

Jezal glanced furtively up at Ninefingers. It was not at all difficult to picture a barbaric state with that big brute beside him, but it was ridiculous to suppose that his beautiful home had once been a wasteland, that he was descended from primitives. This bald old man was a blathering liar, or a madman, but some important people seemed to take him seriously.

And Jezal thought it best always to do what the important people said.

Logen followed the others into a broken-down courtyard, bounded on three sides by the crumbling buildings of the University, on the fourth by the inner face of the sheer wall of the Agriont. All was covered in old moss, thick ivy, dry brambles. A man sat on a rickety chair among the weeds, watching them come closer.

'I've been expecting you,' he said, pushing himself up with some difficulty. 'Damn knees, I'm not what I used to be.' An unremarkable man past middle-age, in a threadbare shirt with stains down the front.

Bayaz frowned at him. 'You are the Chief Warden?'

'I am.'

'And where are the rest of your company?'

'My wife is getting the breakfast ready, but not counting her, well, I am the whole company. It's eggs,' he said happily, patting his stomach.

'What?'

'For breakfast. I like eggs.'

'Good for you,' muttered Bayaz, looking slightly put out. 'In King Casamir's reign, the bravest fifty men of the King's Own were appointed Wardens of the House, to guard this gate. There was considered to be no higher honour.'

'That was a long time ago,' said the one and only Warden, plucking at his dirty shirt. 'There were nine of us when I was a lad, but they went on to other things, or died, and were never replaced. Don't know who'll take over when I'm gone. There haven't been too many applicants.'

'You surprise me.' Bayaz cleared his throat. 'Oh, Chief Warden! I, Bayaz, First of the Magi, seek your leave to pass up the stair to the fifth gate, beyond the fifth gate and onto the bridge, across the bridge and to the door of the Maker's House.'

The Chief Warden squinted back. 'You sure?'

Bayaz was growing impatient. 'Yes, why?'

'I remember the last fellow who tried it, way back when I was a lad. Some big man, I reckon, some thinker. He went up those steps with ten strong workmen, chisels and hammers and picks and what-have-you, telling us how he was going to open up the House, bring out its treasures and all. Five minutes and they were back, saying nothing, looking like they saw the dead walk.'

'What happened?' murmured Luthar.

'Don't know, but they had no treasures with them, I can tell you that.'

'Without doubt a daunting story,' said Bayaz, 'but we're going.'

'Your business, I suppose.' And the old man turned and slouched across the miserable courtyard. Up a narrow stair they went, the steps worn down in the middle, up to a tunnel through the high wall of the Agriont, on to a narrow gate in the darkness.

Logen felt an odd sense of worry as the bolts slid back. He shrugged his shoulders, trying to get rid of it, and the Warden grinned at him. 'You can feel it already, eh?'

'Feel what?'

'The Maker's breath, they call it.' He gave the doors the gentlest shove. They swung open together, light spilling through into the darkness. 'The Maker's breath.'

Glokta tottered across the bridge, teeth clenched tight on gums, painfully aware of the volume of empty air beneath his feet. It was a single, delicate arch, leaping from high up on the wall of the Agriont to the gate of the Maker's House. He had often admired it from down in the city, on the other side of the lake, wondering how it had stayed up all these years. A

spectacular, remarkable, beautiful thing. *It does not seem so beautiful now.* Not much wider than a man lying down, too narrow by far for comfort, and with a terrifying drop to the water below. Worse still, it had no parapet. Not so much as a wooden handrail. *And the breeze is rather fresh today.*

Luthar and Ninefingers seemed worried enough by it. *And they have the free and painless use of both their legs.* Only Bayaz made the long trip across without apparent worry, as confident as if his feet were on a country lane.

They walked always in the vast shadow of the House of the Maker, of course. The closer they came, the more massive it seemed, its lowest parapet far higher than the wall of the Agriont. A stark black mountain, rising sheer from the lake below, blotting out the sun. A thing from a different age, built on a different scale.

Glokta glanced back towards the gate behind him. Did he catch a glimpse of something between the battlements on the wall above? *A Practical watching?* They would see the old man fail to open the door. They would be waiting to take him on their way back through. *But until then, I am helpless.* It was not a comforting thought.

And Glokta was in need of comfort. As he tottered further across the bridge, a niggling fear swelled inside him. It was more than the height, more than the strange company, more than the great tower looming above. A base fear, without reason. The animal terror of a nightmare. With every shuffling step the feeling grew. He could see the door now, a square of dark metal set back into the smooth stones of the tower. A circle of letters was etched into the centre of it. For some reason they made Glokta want to vomit, but he dragged himself closer. Two circles: large letters and small letters, a spidery script he did not recognise. His guts churned. Many circles: letters and lines, too detailed to take in. They swam before his stinging, weeping eyes. Glokta could go no further. He stood there, leaning on his cane, fighting with every ounce of will against the need to fall to his knees, turn and crawl away.

Ninefingers was faring little better, breathing hard through his nose, a look of the most profound horror and disgust on his face. Luthar was in considerably worse shape: teeth gritted, white-faced and palsied. He dropped slowly down on one knee, gasping, as Glokta edged past him.

Bayaz did not seem afraid. He stepped right up to the door and ran his fingers over the larger symbols. 'Eleven wards, and eleven wards reversed.' He traced the circle of smaller characters. 'And eleven times eleven.' His finger followed the fine line outside them. *Can it be that line is made of tiny letters too?* 'Who can say how many hundreds here? Truly, a most potent enchantment!'

The sense of awe was only slightly diminished by the sound of Luthar puking noisily over the side of the bridge. 'What does it say?' croaked Glokta, swallowing some bile of his own.

The old man grinned at him. 'Can you not feel it, Inquisitor? It says turn away. It says get you gone. It says . . . none . . . shall . . . pass. But the message is not for us.' He reached into his collar and pulled out the rod of metal. The same dark metal as the door itself.

'We shouldn't be here,' growled Ninefingers from behind. 'This place is dead. We should go.' But Bayaz did not seem to hear.

'The magic has leaked out of the world,' Glokta heard him murmuring, 'and

all the achievements of Juvenis lie in ruins.' He weighed the key in his hand, brought it slowly upwards. 'But the Maker's works stand strong as ever. Time has not diminished them . . . nor ever will.' There did not even seem to be a hole, but the key slid slowly into the door. Slowly, slowly, into the very centre of the circles. Glokta held his breath.

Click.

And nothing happened. The door did not open. *That is all then. The game is over.* He felt a surge of relief as he turned back towards the Agriont, raising a hand to signal to the Practicals on the wall above. *I need not go further. I need not.* Then an answering echo came from deep within.

Click.

Glokta felt his face twitch in sympathy with the sound. *Did I imagine it?* He hoped so, with all his being.

Click.

Again. *No mistake.* And now, before his disbelieving eyes, the circles in the door began to turn. Glokta took a stunned step back, his cane scraping on the stones of the bridge.

Click, click.

There had been no sign that the metal was not all one piece, no cracks, no grooves, no mechanism, and yet the circles span, each at a different speed.

Click, click, click . . .

Faster now, and faster. Glokta felt dizzy. The innermost ring, with the largest letters, was still crawling. The outermost, the thinnest one, was flying round too fast for his eyes to follow.

. . . click, click, click, click, click . . .

Shapes formed in the markings as the symbols passed each other: lines, squares, triangles, unimaginably intricate, dancing before his eyes then vanishing as the wheels spun on . . .

Click.

And the circles were still, arranged in a new pattern. Bayaz reached up and pulled the key from the door. There was a soft hissing, barely audible, as of water far away, and a long crack appeared in the door. The two halves moved slowly, smoothly away from each other. The space between them grew steadily larger.

Click.

They slid into the walls, flush with the sides of the square archway. The door stood open.

'Now that,' said Bayaz softly, 'is craftsmanship.'

No fetid wind spilled out, no stench of rot or decay, no sign of long years passed, only a waft of cool, dry air. *And yet the feeling is of opening a coffin.*

Silence, but for the wind fumbling across the dark stones, the breath sighing in Glokta's dry throat, the distant lapping of the water far below. The unearthly terror was gone. He felt only a deep worry as he stared into the open archway. *But no worse than when I wait outside the Arch Lector's office.* Bayaz turned round, smiling.

'Long years have passed since I sealed this place, and in all that slow time no man has crossed the threshold. You three are truly honoured.' Glokta did not feel honoured. He felt ill. 'There are dangers within. Touch nothing, and

go only where I lead you. Follow close behind me, for the ways are not always the same.'

'Not the same?' asked Glokta. 'How can that be?'

The old man shrugged. 'I am only the doorman,' he said as he slipped the key and its chain back inside his shirt, 'not the architect.' And he stepped into the shadows.

Jezal did not feel well, not well at all. It was not simply the vile nausea that the letters on the doors had somehow created, it was more. A lurch of sudden shock and disgust, like picking up a cup and drinking, expecting water, and finding something else inside. Piss perhaps, in this case. That same wave of ugly surprise, but stretching out over minutes, over hours. Things that he had dismissed as foolishness, or old stories, were suddenly revealed as facts before his eyes. The world was a different place than it had been the day before, a weird and unsettling place, and he had infinitely preferred it the way it was.

He could not understand why he had to be here. Jezal knew precious little about history. Kanedias, Juvens, Bayaz even, they were names from dusty books, heard as a child and holding no interest even then. It was just bad luck, bad luck was all. He had won the Contest, and here he was, wandering about in some strange old tower. That was all it was. A strange old tower.

'Welcome,' said Bayaz, 'to the House of the Maker.'

Jezal looked up from the floor and his jaw sagged open. The word 'house' did little to describe the vastness of the dim space in which he found himself. The Lords' Round itself could have fitted comfortably inside it, the entire building, with room to spare. The walls were made from rough stones, unfinished, unmortared, piled haphazardly, but rising endlessly upward, upward. Above the centre of the room, far above, something was suspended. A huge, fascinating something.

It put Jezal in mind of a navigator's instruments, rendered on an enormous scale. A system of gigantic metal rings, shining in the dim light, one about the other, with further, smaller rings running between them, inside them, around them. Hundreds of them perhaps, all told, scored with markings: writing maybe, or meaningless scratches. A large black ball hung in the centre.

Bayaz was already walking out into the vast circle of the floor, covered in intricate lines, set into the dark stone in bright metal, his footfalls echoing high above. Jezal crept after him. There was something frightening, something dizzying, about moving across a space so huge.

'This is Midderland,' said Bayaz.

'What?'

The old man pointed down. The squiggly lines of metal began to take on meaning. Coastlines, mountains, rivers, the land and the sea. The shape of Midderland, clear in Jezal's mind from a hundred maps, was laid out beneath his feet.

'The whole Circle of the World.' Bayaz gestured across the endless floor. 'That way is Angland, and beyond, the North. Gurkhul is over there. There is Starikland, and the Old Empire, and over here the City States of Styria, beyond them Suljuk and distant Thond. Kanedias observed that the lands of the known World form a circle, with its centre here, at his House, and its outer edge passing through the island of Shabulyan, far to the west, beyond the Old

Empire.'

'The edge of the World,' muttered the Northman, nodding slowly to himself.

'Some arrogance,' snorted Glokta, 'to think of your home as the centre of everything.'

'Huh.' Bayaz looked about him at the vastness of the chamber. 'The Maker was never short on arrogance. Nor were his brothers.'

Jezal stared up gormlessly. The room was even higher than it was wide, its ceiling, if there was one, lost in shadow. An iron rail ran round the rough stone walls, a gallery perhaps twenty strides above. Beyond it, higher still, there was another, and another, and another, vague in the half light. Over all hung the strange device.

He gave a sudden start. It was moving! It was all moving! Slowly, smoothly, silently, the rings shifted, turned, revolved one about the other. He could not imagine how it was driven. Somehow, the key turning in the lock must have set it off . . . or could it have been turning all these years?

He felt dizzy. The whole mechanism now seemed to be spinning, revolving, faster and faster, the galleries too, shifting in opposite directions. Staring straight upwards was not helping with his sense of disorientation, and he fixed his aching eyes on the floor, on the map of Midderland beneath his feet. He gasped. That was even worse! Now the whole floor seemed to be turning! The entire chamber was revolving around him! The archways leading out were all identical, a dozen of them or more. He could not guess now through which one they had entered. He felt a wave of horrible panic. Only that distant black orb in the centre of the device was still. He fixed his watering eyes desperately on that, forced himself to breathe slow.

The feeling faded. The vast hall was still again, almost. The rings were still shifting, almost imperceptibly, inching ever onwards. He swallowed a mouthful of spit, hunched his shoulders, and hurried after the others with his head down.

'Not that way!' roared Bayaz suddenly, his voice exploding in the thick silence, ripping out and bouncing back, echoing a thousand times around the cavernous space.

'Not that way!'

'Not that way!'

Jezal jumped backwards. The archway, and the dim hall beyond, looked identical to the one down which the others had been walking, but he saw now that they were off to his right. He had got turned around somehow.

'Go only where I go, I said!' hissed the old man.

'Not that way.'

'Not that way.'

'I'm sorry,' stammered Jezal, his voice sounding pitifully small in the vast space, 'I thought . . . it all looks the same!'

Bayaz placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder and drew him smoothly away. 'I did not mean to scare you, my friend, but it would be a great shame if one so promising were taken from us quite so young.' Jezal swallowed and stared into the shadowy hallway, wondering what might have awaited him down there. His mind provided any number of unpleasant possibilities.

The echoes still whispered at him as he turned away. ' . . . not that way, not

that way, not that way . . .’

Logen hated this place. The stones were cold and dead, the air was still and dead, even the sounds they made as they moved fell muffled and lifeless. It wasn’t cold and it wasn’t hot, and yet his back trickled with sweat, his neck prickled with aimless fear. He’d jerk around every few steps, stung by the sudden feeling he was being watched, but there was never anyone behind him. Only the boy Luthar and the cripple Glokta, looking every bit as worried and confused as he was.

‘We chased him through these very halls,’ murmured Bayaz quietly. ‘Eleven of us. All the Magi, together for the last time. All but Khalul. Zacharus, and Cawneil, they fought with the Maker here, and each was bested. They were fortunate to escape with their lives. Anselmi and Brokentooh had worse luck. Kanedias was the death of them. Two good friends, two brothers, I lost that day.’

They edged round a narrow balcony, lit by a pale curtain of light. On one side sheer stones rose smooth, on the other they dropped away and were lost in the darkness. A black pit, full of shadows, with no far side, no top, no bottom. Despite the vastness of the space there were no echoes. No air moved. There was not the tiniest breeze. The air was stale and close as a tomb.

‘There should be water down there, surely,’ muttered Glokta, frowning over the rail. ‘There should be something, shouldn’t there?’ He squinted up. ‘Where’s the ceiling?’

‘This place stinks,’ whined Luthar, one hand clasped over his nose.

Logen agreed with him, for once. It was a smell he knew well, and his lips curled back with hatred at it. ‘Smells like fucking Flatheads.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Bayaz, ‘the Shanka are the Maker’s work also.’

‘His work?’

‘Indeed. He took clay, and metal, and left-over flesh and he made them.’

Logen stared. ‘He made them?’

‘To fight in his war. Against us. Against the Magi. Against his brother Juvens. He bred the first Shanka here and let them loose upon the world – to grow, and breed, and destroy. That was their purpose. For many years after Kanedias’ death we hunted them, but we could not catch them all. We drove them into the darkest corners of the world, and there they have grown and bred again, and now come forth to grow, and breed, and destroy, as they were always meant to do.’ Logen gawped at him.

‘Shanka.’ Luthar chuckled and shook his head.

Flatheads were no laughing matter. Logen turned suddenly, blocking the narrow balcony with his body, looming over Luthar in the half light. ‘Something funny?’

‘Well, I mean, everyone knows there’s no such thing.’

‘I’ve fought them with my own hands,’ growled Logen, ‘all my life. They killed my wife, my children, my friends. The North is swarming with fucking Flatheads.’ He leaned down. ‘So don’t tell me there’s no such thing.’

Luthar had turned pale. He looked to Glokta for support, but the Inquisitor had sagged against the wall, rubbing at his leg, thin lips tight shut, hollow face beaded with sweat. ‘I don’t care a shit either way!’ he snapped.

‘There’s plenty of Shanka in the world,’ hissed Logen, sticking his face right

up close to Luthar's. 'Maybe one day you'll meet some.' He turned and stalked off after Bayaz, already disappearing through an archway at the far end of the balcony. He had no wish to be left behind in this place.

Yet another hall. An enormous one, lined with a silent forest of columns on either side, peopled with a multitude of shadows. Light cut down in shafts from far above, etching strange patterns into the stone floor, shapes of light and dark, lines of black and white. *Almost like writing. Is there a message here? For me? Glokta was trembling. If I looked, just for a moment longer, perhaps I could understand . . .*

Luthar wandered past, his shadow fell across the floor, the lines were broken, the feeling was gone. Glokta shook himself. *I am losing my reason in this cursed place. I must think clearly. Just the facts, Glokta, only the facts.*

'Where does the light come from?' he asked.

Bayaz waved his hand. 'Above.'

'There are windows?'

'Perhaps.'

Glokta's cane tapped into the light, tapped into the dark, his left boot dragged along behind. 'Is there nothing but hallway? What's the point of it all?'

'Who can know the Maker's mind?' intoned Bayaz pompously, 'or fathom his great design?' He seemed almost to take pride in never giving straight answers.

The whole place was a colossal waste of effort as far as Glokta could see. 'How many lived here?'

'Long years ago, in happier times, many hundreds. All manner of people who served Kanedias, and helped him in his works. But the Maker was ever distrustful, and jealous of his secrets. Bit by bit he turned his followers out, into the Agriont, the University. Towards the end, only three lived here. Kanedias himself, his assistant Jaremeias,' Bayaz paused for a moment, 'and his daughter Tolomei.'

'The Maker's daughter?'

'What of it?' snapped the old man.

'Nothing, nothing at all.' *And yet the veneer slipped then, if only for an instant. It is strange that he knows the ways of this place so well.* 'When did you live here?'

Bayaz frowned deep. 'There is such a thing as too many questions.'

Glokta watched him walk away. *Sult was wrong. The Arch Lector, fallible after all. He underestimated this Bayaz, and it cost him. Who is this bald, irritable fool, who can make a sprawling idiot of the most powerful man in the Union?* Standing here, deep within the bowels of this unearthly place, the answer did not seem so strange.

The First of the Magi.

'This is it.'

'What?' asked Logen. The hallway stretched out in either direction, curving gently, disappearing into the darkness, walls of huge stone blocks, unbroken on either side.

Bayaz did not answer. He was running his hands gently over the stones,

looking for something. 'Yes. This is it.' Bayaz pulled the key out from his shirt. 'You might want to prepare yourselves. '

'For what?'

The Magus slid the key into an unseen hole. One of the blocks that made up the walls suddenly vanished, flying up into the ceiling with a thunderous crash. Logen reeled, shaking his head. He saw Luthar bent forward, hands clamped over his ears. The whole corridor seemed to hum with crashing echoes, on and on.

'Wait,' said Bayaz, though Logen could barely hear him over the ringing in his head. 'Touch nothing. Go nowhere.' He stepped through the opening, leaving the key lodged in the wall.

Logen peered after him. A glimmer of light shone down a narrow passageway, a rushing sound washed through like the trickling of a stream. Logen felt a strange curiosity picking at him. He glanced back at the other two. Perhaps Bayaz had meant only for them to stay? He ducked through the doorway.

And squinted up at a bright, round chamber. Light flooded in from high above, piercing light, almost painful to look at after the gloom of all the rest. The curving walls were perfect, clean white stone, running with trickling water, flowing down all around and collecting in a round pool below. The air was cool, damp on Logen's skin. A narrow bridge sprang out from the passage, steps leading upwards, ending at a tall white pillar, rising from the water. Bayaz was standing there, on top of it, staring down at something.

Logen crept up behind the Magus, breathing shallow. A block of white stone stood there. Water dripped onto its smooth, hard centre from above. A regular tap, tap, tap, always in the same spot. Two things lay in the thin layer of wet. The first was a square box, simply made from dark metal, big enough to hold a man's head, maybe. The other was altogether stranger.

A weapon perhaps, like an axe. A long shaft, made from tiny metal tubes, all twisted about each other like the stems of old vines. At one end there was a scored grip, at the other there was a flat piece of metal, pierced with small holes, a long, thin hook curving out from it. The light played over its many dark surfaces, glittering with beads of moisture. Strange, beautiful, fascinating. On the grip one letter glinted, silver in the dark metal. Logen recognised it from his sword. The mark of Kanedias. The work of the Master Maker.

'What is this?' he asked, reaching out for it.

'Don't touch it!' screamed Bayaz, slapping Logen's hand away. 'Did I not tell you to wait?'

Logen took an uncertain step back. He had never seen the Magus look so worried, but he couldn't keep his eyes off the strange thing on the slab. 'Is it a weapon?'

Bayaz breathed a long, slow breath. 'A most terrible one, my friend. A weapon against which no steel, no stone, no magic can protect you. Do not even tread near it, I warn you. There are dangers. The Divider, Kanedias called it, and with it he killed his brother Juvens, my master. He once told me it has two edges. One here, one on the Other Side.'

'What the hell does that mean?' muttered Logen. He couldn't even see one edge you could cut with.

Bayaz shrugged. 'If I knew that I suppose that I'd be the Master Maker, instead of merely the First of the Magi.' He reached forward and lifted the box, wincing as though it was a great weight. 'Could you help me with this?'

Logen hooked his hands under it, and gasped. It could hardly have weighed more if it was a block of solid iron. 'Heavy,' he grunted.

'Kanedias forged it to be strong. As strong as all his great skill could make it. Not to keep its contents safe from the World.' He leaned close and spoke softly. 'To keep the World safe from its contents.'

Logen frowned down. 'What's in it?'

'Nothing,' muttered Bayaz. 'Yet.'

Jezal was trying to think of three men in the world he hated more. Brint? He was simply a swollen-headed idiot. Gorst? He had merely done his meagre best to beat Jezal in a fencing match. Varuz? He was just a pompous old ass.

No. These three were at the top of his list. The arrogant old man with his idiotic prattle and his self-important air of mystery. The hulking savage with his ugly scars and his menacing frown. The patronising cripple with his smug little comments and his pretensions of knowing all about life. The three of them, combined with the stagnant air and perpetual gloom of this horrible place, were almost enough to make Jezal puke again. The only thing he could imagine worse than his present company was no company at all. He looked into the shadows all around, and shuddered at the thought.

Still, his spirits rose as they turned a corner. There was a small square of daylight up ahead. He hurried towards it, overtaking Glokta as he shambled along on his cane, mouth watering with anticipation at the thought of being back out under the sky.

Jezal closed his eyes with pleasure as he stepped into the open air. The cold wind stroked his face and he gasped in great lungfuls of it. The relief was terrific, as though he had been trapped down there in the darkness for weeks, as though fingers clamped around his throat had just now been released. He walked forward across a wide, open space, paved with stark, flat stones. Ninefingers and Bayaz stood side by side up ahead, behind a parapet, waist high, and beyond them . . .

The Agriont came into view below. A patchwork of white walls, grey roofs, glinting windows, green gardens. They were nowhere near the summit of the Maker's House, only on one of the lowest roofs, above the gate, but still terrifyingly high. Jezal recognised the crumbling University, the shining dome of the Lords Round, the squat mass of the House of Questions. He could see the Square of Marshals, a bowl of wooden seating in amongst the buildings, perhaps even the tiny yellow flash of the fencing circle in its centre. Beyond the citadel, surrounded by its white wall and twinkling moat, the city was a sprawling grey mass under the dirty grey sky, stretching all the way to the sea.

Jezal laughed with disbelief and delight. The Tower of Chains was a step ladder compared to this. He was so high above the world that all seemed somehow still, frozen in time. He felt like a king. No man had seen this, not for hundreds of years. He was huge, grand, far more important than the tiny people that must live and work in the little buildings down there. He turned to look at Glokta, but the cripple was not smiling. He was even paler than ever, frowning at the toy city, his left eye twitching with worry.

‘Scared of heights?’ laughed Jezal.

Glokta turned his ashen face toward him. ‘There were no steps. We climbed no steps to get here!’ Jezal’s grin began to fade. ‘No steps, do you understand? How could it be? How? Tell me that!’

Jezal swallowed as he thought over the way they had come. The cripple was right. No steps, no ramps, they had gone neither up nor down. Yet here they were, far above the tallest tower of the Agriont. He felt sick, again. The view now seemed dizzying, disgusting, obscene. He backed unsteadily away from the parapet. He wanted to go home.

‘I followed him through the darkness, alone, and here I faced him. Kanedias. The Master Maker. Here we fought. Fire, and steel, and flesh. Here we stood. He threw Tolomei from the roof before my eyes. I saw it happen, but I could not stop him. His own daughter. Can you imagine? No one could have deserved that less than she. There never was a more innocent spirit.’ Logen frowned. He hardly knew what to say to this.

‘Here we struggled,’ muttered Bayaz, his meaty fists clenched tight on the bare parapet. ‘I tore at him, with fire and steel, and flesh, and he at me. I cast him down. He fell burning, and broke upon the bridge below. And so the last of the sons of Euz passed from the world, so many of their secrets lost forever. They destroyed each other, all four of them. What a waste.’

Bayaz turned to look at Logen. ‘But that was a long time ago, eh, my friend? Long ago.’ He puffed out his cheeks and hunched his shoulders. ‘Let us leave this place. It feels like a tomb. It is a tomb. Let us seal it up once more, and the memories with it. That is all in the past.’

‘Huh,’ said Logen. ‘My father used to say the seeds of the past bear fruit in the present.’

‘So they do.’ Bayaz reached out slowly, and his fingers brushed against the cold, dark metal of the box in Logen’s hands. ‘So they do. Your father was a wise man.’

Glokta’s leg was burning, his twisted spine was a river of fire from his arse to his skull. His mouth was dry as sawdust, his face sweaty and twitching, the breath hissing in his nose, but he pressed on through the darkness, away from the vast hall with its black orb and its strange contraption, on towards the open door. *And into the light.*

He stood there with his head tipped back, on the narrow bridge before the narrow gateway, his hand trembling on the handle of his cane, blinking and rubbing his eyes, gasping in the free air and feeling the cool breeze on his face. *Who would have thought that wind could feel so fine? Maybe it’s just as well there weren’t any steps. I might never have made it out.*

Luthar was already halfway back across the bridge, hurrying as though he had a devil a stride behind. Ninefingers was not far away, breathing hard and muttering something in Northern over and over. ‘Still alive,’ Glokta thought it might be. His big hands were clenched tight around that square metal box, tendons standing out as though it weighed as much as an anvil. *There was more to this trip than just proving a point. What is it that they brought out from there? What weighs so heavily?* He glanced back into the darkness, and shivered. He was not sure he even wanted to know.

Bayaz strolled out of the tunnel and into the open air, looking smug as ever. 'So, Inquisitor,' he said breezily. 'How did you find your trip into the House of the Maker?'

A twisted, strange and horrible nightmare. I might even have preferred to return to the Emperor's prisons for a few hours. 'Something to do of a morning,' he snapped.

'I'm so glad you found it diverting,' chuckled Bayaz, as he pulled the rod of dark metal out from his shirt. 'And tell me, do you still believe that I'm a liar? Or have your suspicions finally been laid to rest?'

Glokta frowned at the key. He frowned at the old man. He frowned into the crushing darkness of the Maker's House. *My suspicions grow with every passing moment. They are never laid to rest. They only change shape.* 'Honestly? I don't know what to believe.'

'Good. Knowing your own ignorance is the first step to enlightenment. Between you and me, though, I'd think of something else to tell the Arch Lector.' Glokta felt his eyelid flickering. 'You'd better start across, eh, Inquisitor? While I lock up?'

The plunge to the cold water below no longer seemed to hold much fear. *If I were to fall, at least I would die in the light.* Glokta looked back only once, as he heard the doors of the Maker's House shut with a soft click, the circles slide back into place. *All as it was before we arrived.* He turned his prickling back, sucked his gums against the familiar waves of nausea, and cursed and struggled his limping way across the bridge.

Luthar was hammering desperately on the old gates at the far end. 'Let us in!' he was nearly sobbing as Glokta hobbled up, an edge of cracked panic to his voice. 'Let us in!' The door finally wobbled open to reveal a shocked-looking Warden. *Such a shame. I was sure that Captain Luthar was about to burst into tears. The proud winner of the Contest, the Union's bravest young son, the very flower of manhood, blubbing on his knees. That sight could almost have made the trip worthwhile.* Luthar darted through the open gate and Ninefingers followed grimly after, cradling the metal box in his arms. The Warden squinted at Glokta as he limped up to the gate. 'Back so soon?'

You old dolt. 'What the hell are you talking about, so soon?'

'I'm only halfway through my eggs. You've been gone less than half an hour.'

Glokta barked a joyless laugh. 'Half a day, perhaps.' But he frowned as he peered past into the courtyard. The shadows were almost exactly where they had been when they left. *Early morning still, but how?*

'The Maker once told me that time is all in the mind.' Glokta winced as he turned his head. Bayaz had come up behind him, and was tapping the side of his bald skull with a thick finger. 'It could be worse, believe me. It's when you come out before you went in that you really start to worry.' He smiled, eyes glinting in the light through the doorway. *Playing the fool? Or trying to make a fool of me? Either way, these games grow tiresome.*

'Enough riddles,' sneered Glokta. 'Why not just tell me what you're after?'

The First of the Magi, if such he was, grinned still wider. 'I like you, Inquisitor, I really do. I wouldn't be surprised if you were the only honest man left in this whole damn country. We should have a talk at some point, you and

I. A talk about what I want, and about what you want.' His smile vanished.
'But not today.'

And he stepped through the open door, leaving Glokta behind in the shadows.

Nobody's Dog

'Why me?' West murmured to himself through gritted teeth, staring across the bridge towards the South Gate. That nonsense at the docks had taken him longer than expected, much longer, but then didn't everything these days? It sometimes felt as if he was the only man in the Union seriously preparing for a war, and had to organise the entire business on his own, right down to counting the nails that would hold the horses' shoes on. He was already late for his daily meeting with Marshal Burr, and knew there would be a hundred impossible things for him to get done today. There always were. To become involved in some pointless hold-up here at the very gate of the Agriont was all he needed.

'Why the hell must it be me?' His head was starting to hurt again. That all too familiar pulsing behind the eyes. Each day it seemed to come on earlier, and end up worse.

Because of the heat over the last few days, the guards had been permitted to come to duty without full armour. West reckoned that at least two of them were now regretting it. One was folded up on the ground near the gate, hands clasped between his legs, whimpering noisily. His sergeant stood stooped over next to him, blood running from his nose and pattering dark red drops on the stones of the bridge. The two other soldiers in the detail had their spears lowered, blades pointing towards a scrawny dark-skinned youth. Another southerner stood nearby, an old man with long grey hair, leaning against the handrail and watching the scene with an expression of profound resignation.

The youth glanced quickly over his shoulder and West felt a sting of surprise. A woman: black hair hacked off short and sticking off her head in a mess of greasy spikes. One sleeve was torn off round her shoulder and a long, sinewy brown arm stuck out, ending in a fist bunched tight around the grip of a curved knife. The blade shone, mirror bright and evilly sharp, the one and only thing about her that looked clean. There was a thin, grey scar all the way down the right side of her face, through her black eyebrow and across her scowling lips. It was her eyes, though, which truly caught West off guard: slightly slanted, narrowed with the deepest hostility and suspicion, and yellow. He had seen all kinds of Kantics in his time, while he was fighting in Gurkhul, in the war, but he never saw eyes like that before. Deep, rich, golden yellow, like . . .

Piss. That was the smell, as he came closer. Piss, and dirt, and a lot of old, sour sweat. He remembered that from the war alright, the stink of men who had not washed in a very long time. West fought the compulsion to wrinkle up his nose and breathe through his mouth as he approached, and the urge to circle out wide and keep his distance from that glittering blade. You have to show no fear if you're to calm a dangerous situation, however much you might be feeling. In his experience, if you could seem to be in control, you

were more than halfway to being there.

'What the hell is going on here?' he growled at the bloody-faced sergeant. He had no need at all to feign annoyance, he was getting later and angrier by the second.

'These stinking beggars wanted to come into the Agriont, sir! I tried to turn them away, of course, but they have letters!'

'Letters?'

The strange old man tapped West on the shoulder, handed over a folded sheet of paper, slightly grubby round the edges. He read it, his frown growing steadily deeper. 'This is a letter of transit signed by Lord Hoff himself. They must be admitted.'

'But not armed, sir! I said they couldn't go in armed!' The sergeant held up an odd looking bow of dark wood in one hand, and a curved sword of the Gurkish design in the other. 'It was enough of a struggle getting her to give these up, but when I tried to search her . . . this Gurkish bitch . . .' The woman hissed and took a quick step forward, and the sergeant and his two guards shuffled nervously back in a tight group.

'Peace, Ferro,' sighed the old man in the Kantic tongue. 'For God's sake, peace.' The woman spat on the stones of the bridge and hissed some curse that West could not understand, weaving the blade back and forth in a way that suggested she knew how to use it, and was more than willing.

'Why me?' West mumbled under his breath. It was plain he was going nowhere until this difficulty was resolved. As if he didn't have enough to worry about. He took a deep breath and did his best to put himself in the position of the stinking woman: a stranger, surrounded by strange-looking people speaking words she didn't understand, brandishing spears and trying to search her. Probably she was even now thinking about how horrible West smelled. Disorientated and afraid, most likely, rather than dangerous. She did look very dangerous though, and not in the least afraid.

The old man certainly seemed the more reasonable of the two, so West turned to him first. 'Are you two from Gurkhul?' he asked him in broken Kantic.

The old man turned his tired eyes on West. 'No. There is more to the South than the Gurkish.'

'Kadir then? Taurish?'

'You know the South?'

'A little. I fought there, in the war.'

The old man jerked his head at the woman, watching them suspiciously with her slanted yellow eyes. 'She is from a place called Muntaz.'

'I never heard of it.'

'Why would you have?' The old man shrugged his bony shoulders. 'A small country, by the sea, far to the east of Shaffa, beyond the mountains. The Gurkish conquered it years ago, and its people were scattered or made slaves. Apparently she has been in a foul mood ever since.' The woman scowled over at them, keeping one eye on the soldiers.

'And you?'

'Oh, I come from much further south, beyond Kanta, beyond the desert, even beyond the Circle of the World. The land of my birth will not be on your

maps, friend. Yulwei is my name.' He held out a long, black hand.

'Collem West.' The woman watched them warily as they shook hands.

'This one is called West, Ferro! He fought against the Gurkish! Will that make you trust him?' Yulwei didn't sound very hopeful, and indeed the woman's shoulders were still as hunched and bristling as ever, her grip on the knife no less tight. One of the soldiers chose that unfortunate moment to take a step forward, jabbing at the air with his spear, and the woman snarled and spat again, shouting more unintelligible curses.

'That's enough!' West heard himself roaring at the guard. 'Put your fucking spears up!' They blinked at him, shocked, and he fought to bring his voice back under control. 'I don't think this is a full-scale invasion, do you? Put them up!'

Reluctantly the spearpoints drifted away from the woman. West stepped firmly towards her, keeping his eyes fixed on hers with all the authority he could muster. Show no fear, he thought to himself, but his heart was thumping. He held out his open palm, almost close enough to touch her.

'The knife,' said West sharply in his bad Kantic. 'Please. You will not be harmed, you have my word.'

The woman stared at him with those slanted, beady yellow eyes, then at the guards with the spears, then back to him. She took plenty of time over it. West stood there, mouth dry, head still thumping, getting later and later, sweating under his uniform in the hot sun, trying to ignore the woman's smell. Time passed.

'God's teeth, Ferro!' snapped the old man suddenly. 'I am old! Take pity on me! I may only have a few years left! Give the man the knife, before I die!'

'Ssssss,' she hissed, curling her lip. For a dizzy, stretched-out moment the knife went up, then the hilt slapped down into West's palm. He allowed himself a dry swallow of relief. Right up until the last moment he had been almost sure she would give him the sharp end.

'Thank you,' he said, a deal more calmly than he felt. He handed the knife to the sergeant. 'Stow the weapons away and escort our guests into the Agriont, and if any harm comes to anyone, especially her, I'll be holding you responsible, understand?' He glowered at the sergeant for a moment then stepped through the gate into the tunnel before anything else could go wrong, leaving the old man and the stinking woman behind him. His head was thumping harder even than before. Damn it he was late.

'Why the hell me?' he grumbled to himself.

'I am afraid the armouries are closed for the day,' sneered Major Vallimir, staring down his nose at West as though at a beggar whining for small change. 'Our quotas are fulfilled, ahead of schedule, and we will not be lighting the forges again this week.

Perhaps if you had arrived on time . . .' The pounding in West's head was growing worse than ever. He forced himself to breathe slowly, and keep his voice calm and even. There was nothing to be gained by losing his temper. There was never anything to be gained by that.

'I understand, Major,' said West patiently, 'but there is a war on. Many of the levies we have received are scarcely armed, and Lord Marshal Burr has

asked that the forges be lit, in order to provide equipment for them.'

This was not entirely true, but since joining the Marshal's staff West had more or less given up on telling the whole truth to anyone. That was no way to get anything done. He now employed a mixture of wheedling, bluster, and outright lies, humble entreaties and veiled threats, and had become quite expert at judging which tactic would be most effective on what man.

Unfortunately, he had yet to strike the right chord with Major Vallimir, the Master of the King's Armouries. Somehow, their being equal in rank made matters all the more difficult: he could not quite get away with bullying the man, but could not quite bring himself to beg.

Furthermore, in terms of social standing they were anything but equals. Vallimir was old nobility, from a powerful family, and arrogant beyond belief. He made Jezal dan Luthar seem a humble, selfless type, and his total lack of experience in the field only made matters worse: he behaved doubly like an ass in order to compensate. Instructions from West, though they might come from Marshal Burr himself, were as welcome as they would have been from a reeking swineherd.

Today was no exception. 'This month's quotas are fulfilled, *Major West*,' Vallimir managed to put a sneering emphasis into the name, 'and so the forges are closed. That is all.'

'And this is what you would have me tell the Lord Marshal?'

'The arming of levies is the responsibility of those lords that provide them,' he recited primly. 'I cannot be blamed if *they* fall short on *their* obligations. It is simply not our problem, *Major West*, and you may tell *that* to the Lord Marshal.'

This was always the way of it. Back and forth: from Burr's offices to the various commissary departments, to the commanders of companies, of battalions, of regiments, to the stores scattered around the Agriont and the city, to the armouries, the barracks, the stables, to the docks where the soldiers and their equipment would begin to embark in just a few short days, to other departments and back to where he began, with miles walked and nothing done. Each night he would drop into bed like a stone, only to start up a few hours later with it all to do again.

As commander of a battalion his trade had been to fight the enemy with steel. As a staff officer, it seemed, his role was to fight his own side with paper, more secretary than soldier. He felt like a man trying to push a huge stone up a hill. Straining and straining, getting nowhere, but unable to stop pushing in case the rock should fall and crush him. Meanwhile, arrogant bastards who were in just the same danger lazed on the slopes beside him saying, 'Well, it's not my rock.'

He understood now why, during the war in Gurkhul, there had sometimes not been enough food for the men to eat, or clothes for them to wear, or wagons to draw the supplies with, or horses to draw the wagons, or all manner of other things that were deeply necessary and easily anticipated.

West would be damned before that happened because of some oversight of his. And he would certainly be damned if he would see men die for want of a weapon to fight with. He tried yet again to calm himself, but each time his head hurt more, and his voice was cracking with the effort. 'And what if we

find ourselves mired in Angland with a crowd of half-clothed, unarmed peasants to provide for, what then, Major Vallimir? Whose problem will it be? Not yours, I dare say! You'll still be here, with your cold forges for company!'

West knew as soon as he said it that he had gone too far: the man positively bristled. 'How dare you, sir! Are you questioning my personal honour? My family goes back nine generations in the King's Own!'

West rubbed his eyes, not knowing whether he wanted to laugh or cry. 'I have no doubts as to your courage, I assure you, that was not my meaning at all.' He tried to put himself in Vallimir's position. He did not really know the pressures the man was under: probably he would rather be in command of soldiers than smiths, probably . . . it was no use. The man was a shit, and West hated him. 'This is not a question of your honour, Major, or that of your family. This is a question of our being fit for war!'

Vallimir's eyes had turned deadly cold. 'Just who do you think you're talking to, you dirty commoner? All the influence you have you owe to Burr, and who is he but an oaf from the provinces, risen to his rank by fortune alone?' West blinked. He guessed what they said about him behind his back of course, but it was another thing to hear it to his face. 'And when Burr is gone, what will become of you? Eh? Where will you be without him to hide behind? You've no blood, no family!' Vallimir's lips twisted in a cold sneer. 'Apart from that *sister* of yours of course, and from what I hear—'

West found himself moving forward, fast. 'What?' he snarled. 'What was that?' His expression must have been dire indeed: he saw the colour draining from Vallimir's face.

'I . . . I—'

'You think I need Burr to fight my battles, you fucking gutless worm?' Before he knew it he had moved again, and Vallimir stumbled back towards the wall, flinching sideways and raising one arm as if to ward off an expected blow. It was the most West could do to stop his hands from grabbing hold of the little bastard and shaking him until his head came off. His own skull was throbbing, pounding. He felt as though the pressure would pop his eyes right out of his head. He dragged in long, slow breaths through his nose, clenched his fists until they hurt. The anger slowly subsided, back below the point where it threatened to take sudden control of his body. It only pulsed now, squeezing at his chest.

'If you have something to say on the subject of my sister,' he whispered softly, 'then you can say it. Say it now.' He let his left hand drop slowly to sit on the hilt of his sword. 'And we can settle this outside the city walls.'

Major Vallimir shrank back still further. 'I heard nothing,' he whispered, 'nothing at all.'

'Nothing at all.' West looked down into his white face for a moment longer, then stepped away. 'Now if you would be so good as to reopen the forges for me? We have a great deal of work to get through.'

Vallimir blinked for a moment. 'Of course. I will have them lit at once.'

West turned on his heel and stalked off, knowing the man was glowering daggers at his back, knowing that he had made yet another bad situation worse. One more high-born enemy among the many. The really galling thing was that the man was right. Without Burr, he was as good as finished. He had

no family apart from that *sister* of his. Damn it, his head hurt.

'Why me?' he hissed to himself. 'Why?'

There was still a lot to do today, enough for a whole day's work on its own, but West could take no more. His head hurt so badly that he could hardly see. He had to lie down in the dark, with a wet cloth over his face, if only for an hour, if only for a minute. He fumbled in his pocket for his key, his other hand clamped over his aching eyes, his teeth locked together. Then he heard a sound on the other side of the door. A faint clink of glass. Ardee.

'No,' he hissed to himself. Not now! Why the hell had he ever given her a key? Cursing softly, he raised his fist to knock. Knocking on his own door, that was where he was now. His fist never made it to the wood. A most unpleasant image began to form in the back of his mind. Ardee and Luthar, naked and sweaty, writhing around on his carpet. He turned his key swiftly in the lock and shoved the door open.

She was standing by the window, alone and, he was relieved to see, fully dressed. He was less pleased to see her filling a glass right to the brim from the decanter though. She raised an eyebrow at him as he burst through the door.

'Oh, it's you.'

'Who the hell else would it be?' snapped West. 'These are my rooms, aren't they?'

'Somebody's not in the best of moods this morning.' A bit of wine slopped over the rim of her glass and onto the table. She wiped it up with her hand and sucked her fingers, then took a long swig from the glass for good measure. Her every movement niggled at him.

West grimaced and shoved the door shut. 'Do you have to drink so much?'

'I understand that a young lady should have a beneficial pastime.' Her words were careless, as usual, but even through his headache West could tell there was something strange going on. She kept glancing towards the desk, then she was moving towards it. He got there first, snatched up a piece of paper from the top, one line written on it.

'What's this?'

'Nothing! Give it me!'

He held her away with one arm and read it:

The usual place, tomorrow night—

A.

West's skin prickled with horror. 'Nothing? Nothing?' He shook the letter under his sister's nose. Ardee turned away from him, flicking her head as you might at a fly, saying nothing, but slurping noisily from her glass. West ground his teeth.

'It's Luthar, isn't it?'

'I didn't say so.'

'You didn't have to.' The paper crumpled up into a tiny ball in his white-knuckled hand. He half turned towards the door, every muscle tensed and trembling. It was the most he could do to stop himself dashing out and throttling the little bastard right now, but he was just able to make himself think for a moment.

Jeza! had let him down, and badly, that ungrateful shit. But it was hardly that shocking – the man was an ass. You keep your wine in a paper bag you shouldn't be too upset when it leaks. Besides, Jeza! wasn't the one writing the letters. What good would stepping on his neck do? There would always be more empty-headed young men in the world.

'Just where are you going with this, Ardee?'

She sat down on the settle and glared at him frostily over the rim of her glass. 'With what, brother?'

'You know with what!'

'Aren't we family? Can't we be candid with each other? If you have something to say you can out and say it! Where do you think I'm going?'

'I think you're going straight to shit, since you ask!' He squeezed his voice back down with the greatest of difficulty. 'This business with Luthar has gone way too far. Letters? Letters? I warned him, but it seems he wasn't the problem! What are you thinking? Are you thinking at all? It has to stop, before people start to talk!' He felt a suffocating tightness in his chest, took a deep breath, but his voice burst out anyway. 'They're damn well talking already! It stops now! Do you hear me?'

'I hear you,' she said carelessly, 'but who cares what they think?'

'I care!' He nearly screamed it. 'Do you know how hard I have to work? Do you think I'm a fool? You know what you're about, Ardee!' Her face was turning sullen, but he forged on. 'It's not as though this is the first time! Must I remind you, your luck with men has not exactly been the best!'

'Not with the men in my family, at least!' She was sitting bolt upright now, face tight and pale with anger. 'And what would you know about my luck? We've hardly talked in ten years!'

'We're talking now!' shouted West, flinging the crumpled bit of paper across the room. 'Have you thought how this might turn out? What if you were to get him? Have you considered that? Would his family be charmed by the blushing bride, do you think? At best they'd never speak to you. At worst they'd cut you both off!' He pointed a shaking finger at the door. 'Haven't you noticed he's a vain, arrogant swine! They all are! How would he manage, do you think, without his allowance? Without his friends in high places? He wouldn't know where to begin! How could you be happy with each other?' His head was ready to split in half, but he ranted on. 'And what happens if, as is far more likely, you can't get him? What then? You'd be finished, have you thought on that? You've come close enough before! And you're supposed to be the clever one! You're making a laughing-stock of yourself!' He almost choked on his rage. 'Of both of us!'

Ardee gave a gasp. 'Now we see it!' she nearly screamed at him. 'No one cares a shit for me, but if *your* reputation is in danger—'

'You fucking stupid bitch!' The decanter flew spinning across the room. It crashed against the wall not far from Ardee's head, sending fragments of glass flying and wine running down the plaster. It made him more furious. 'Why don't you fucking listen?'

He was across the room in an instant. Ardee looked surprised, just for a moment, then there was a sharp click – his fist catching her in the face as she got up. She didn't fall far. His hands caught her before she hit the ground,

yanked her up then flung her back against the wall.

'You'll be the end of us!' Her head smacked against the plaster – once, twice, three times. One hand grabbed hold of her neck.

Teeth bared. Body crushed her against the wall. A little snort in her throat as the fingers began to squeeze.

'You selfish, useless . . . fucking . . . whore!'

Hair was tangled across her face. He could only see a narrow slice of skin, the corner of a mouth, one dark eye.

The eye stared back at him. Painless. Fearless. Empty, flat, like a corpse.

Squeeze. Snort. Squeeze.

Squeeze . . .

West came to his senses with a sickening jolt. The fingers snapped open, he jerked the hand away. His sister stayed upright against the wall. He could hear her breathing. Short gasps. Or was that him? His head was splitting. The eye was still staring at him.

He must have imagined it. Must have. Any second now he would wake up, the nightmare would be over. A dream. Then she pushed the hair out of her face.

Her skin was candle wax, pasty white. The trickle of blood from her nose looked almost black against it. The pink marks stood out vivid on her neck. The marks the fingers made. His fingers. Real, then.

West's stomach churned. His mouth opened but no sound came out. He looked at the blood on her lip, and he wanted to be sick. 'Ardee . . .' He was so disgusted he half vomited as he said the word. He could taste the bile at the back of his mouth, but his voice wouldn't stop gurgling away. 'I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry . . . Are you alright?'

'I've had worse.' She reached up slowly and touched her lip with a fingertip. The blood smeared out across her mouth.

'Ardee . . .' One hand reached out to her, then he jerked it back, afraid of what it might do. 'I'm sorry ...'

'He was always sorry. Don't you remember? He'd hold us and cry afterwards. Always sorry. But it never stopped him the next time. Have you forgotten?'

West gagged, choked back vomit again. If she'd wept, and ranted, and beat him with her fists, it would have been easier to bear. Anything but this. He tried never to think about it, but he hadn't forgotten. 'No,' he whispered, 'I remember.'

'Did you think he stopped when you left? He got worse. Only then I'd hide on my own. I used to dream that you'd come back, come back and save me. But when you did come back it wasn't for long, and things weren't the same between us, and you did nothing.'

'Ardee . . . I didn't know—'

'You knew, but you got away. It was easier to do nothing. To pretend. I understand, and do you know, I don't even blame you. It was some kind of comfort, back then, to know you got away. The day he died was the happiest of my life.'

'He was our father—'

'Oh yes. My bad luck. Bad luck with men. I cried at the grave like a dutiful

daughter. Cried and cried until the mourners feared for my reason. Then I lay in bed awake, until everyone was sleeping. I crept out of the house, I went back to the grave, I stood a while looking down . . . then I fucking pissed on it! I pulled up my shift, and I squatted down, and I pissed on him! And all the while I was thinking – I'll be nobody's dog any more!

She wiped the blood from her nose on the back of her hand. 'You should have seen how happy I was when you sent for me! I read the letter over and over. The pathetic little dreams all came alive again. Hope, eh? What a fucking curse! Off to live with my brother. My protector. He'll look out for me, he'll help me. Now maybe *I* can have a life! But I find you different than I remembered. All grown up. First you ignore me, then you lecture me, then you hit me, and now you're sorry. Truly your father's son!'

He groaned. It was as if she was sticking a needle in him, right in his skull. Less than he deserved. She was right. He had failed her. Long before today. While he had been playing with swords and kissing the arses of people who despised him, she had been suffering. A little effort was all it would have taken, but he could never face it. Every minute he had spent with her he felt the guilt, like a rock in his gut, weighing him down, unbearable.

She stepped away from the wall. 'Perhaps I'll go and pay a call on Jezal. He may be the shallowest idiot in the whole city, but I don't think he'd ever raise a hand to me, do you?' She pushed him out of the way and made for the door.

'Ardee!' he caught hold of her arm. 'Please . . . Ardee . . . I'm sorry ...'

She stuck her tongue out, curled it into a tube, and blew bloody spit through it. It splattered softly down the front of his uniform. 'That's for your sorry, bastard.'

The door banged shut in his face.

Each Man Worships Himself

Ferro stared at the big pink through narrowed eyes, and he stared back. It had been going on for a good while now, not all the time, but most of it. Staring. They were all ugly, these soft white things, but this one was something special.

Hideous.

She knew that she was scarred, and weathered by sun and wind, worn down by years in the wilderness, but the pale skin on this one's face looked like a shield hard used in battle – chopped, gouged, torn, dented. It was surprising to see the eyes still alive in a face so battered, but they were, and they were watching her.

She had decided he was dangerous.

Not just big, but strong. Brutal strong. Twice her weight maybe, and his thick neck was all sinew. She could feel the strength coming off him. She wouldn't have been surprised if he could lift her with one hand, but that didn't worry her too much. He'd have to get a hold on her first. Big and strong can make a man slow.

Slow and dangerous don't mix.

Scars didn't worry her either. They just meant he'd been in a lot of fights, they didn't say whether he'd won. It was other things. The way he sat – still but not quite relaxed. Ready. Patient. The way his eyes moved – cunning, careful, from her to the rest of the room, then back to her. Dark eyes, watching, thoughtful. Weighing her up. Thick veins on the backs of his hands, but long fingers, clever fingers, lines of dirt under the nails. One finger missing. A white stump. She didn't like any of it. Smelled like danger.

She wouldn't want to fight this one unarmed.

But she'd given her knife over to that pink on the bridge. She'd been on the very point of stabbing him, but at the last moment she'd changed her mind. Something in his eyes had reminded her of Aruf, before the Gurkish stuck his head on a spear. Sad and level, as if he understood her. As if she was a person, and not a thing. At the last moment, despite herself, she'd given the blade away. Allowed herself to be led in here.

Stupid!

She regretted it now, bitterly, but she'd fight any way she could, if she had to. Most people never realise how full the world is of weapons. Things to throw, or throw enemies on to. Things to break, or use as clubs. Wound-up cloths to strangle with. Dirt to fling in faces. Failing that, she'd bite his throat out. She curled her lips back and showed him her teeth to prove it, but he seemed not to notice. Just sat there, watching. Silent, still, ugly, and dangerous.

'Fucking pinks,' she hissed to herself.

The thin one, by contrast, hardly seemed dangerous at all. Ill-looking, with

long hair like a woman's. Awkward and twitchy, licking his lips. He would sneak the odd glance at her, but look away as soon as she scowled over at him, swallowing, the knobbly lump in his neck squirming up and down. He seemed scared, no threat, but Ferro kept him in the corner of her eye while she watched the big one. Best not to dismiss him entirely.

Life had taught her to expect surprises.

That just left the old man. She didn't trust a one of these pinks, but she trusted this bald one least of all. Many deep lines on his face, round his eyes, round his nose. Cruel lines. Hard, heavy bones in his cheeks. Big thick hands, white hairs on the backs of them. If she had to kill these three, for all the danger that the big one seemed to offer, she decided she would kill this bald one first. He had the look of a slaver in his eye, staring at her up and down, all over. A cold look, judging what she might be worth.

Bastard.

Bayaz, Yulwei called him, and the two old men seemed to know each other well. 'So, brother,' the bald pink was saying in the Kantic tongue, though it was plain enough they weren't related, 'how is it in the great Empire of Gurkhul?'

Yulwei sighed. 'Only a year since he seized the crown, and Uthman has broken the last of the rebels, and brought the governors firmly to heel. Already, the young Emperor is more feared than ever his father was. Uthman-ul-Dosht, his soldiers call him, and proudly. Almost all of Kanta is in his grip. He reigns supreme all round the Southern Sea.'

'Aside from Dagoska.'

'True, but his eyes are bent on it. His armies swarm toward the peninsula, and his agents are ever busy behind Dagoska's great walls. Now that there is war in the North, it cannot be long before he feels the time is ripe to lay siege to the city, and when he does, I do not think it can stand long against him.'

'Are you sure? The Union still controls the seas.'

Yulwei frowned. 'We saw ships, brother. Many great ships. The Gurkish have built a fleet. A powerful one, in secret. They must have begun years ago, during the last war. I fear the Union will control the seas but little longer.'

'A fleet? I had hoped to have a few more years in which to prepare.' The bald pink sounded grim. 'My plans only become the more urgent.'

She was bored with their talk. She was used to being always on the move, keeping always one stride ahead, and she hated to stand still. Stay too long in one place, and the Gurkish would find you. She wasn't interested in being an exhibit for these curious pinks to stare at. She sauntered off around the room while the two old men made endless words, scowling and sucking her teeth. She swung her arms around. She kicked at the worn boards of the floor. She poked at the cloths on the walls, and peered behind them, ran her fingers along the edges of the furniture, clicked her tongue and snapped her teeth together.

Making everyone nervous.

She passed by the big ugly pink in the chair, almost close enough for her swinging hand to touch his pitted skin. Just to show him that she didn't care a shit for his size, or his scars, or anything else. Then she strutted over to the nervous one. The skinny pink with the long hair. He swallowed as she came

close.

'Sssss,' she hissed at him. He muttered something and shuffled away, and she stepped up to the open window in his place. Looking out, turning her back on the room.

Just to show the pinks she didn't care a shit for any of them.

There were gardens outside the window. Trees, plants, wide sweeps of lawn neatly arranged. Groups of fat, pale men and women lazed around in the sun on the carefully cut grass, stuffing their sweaty faces with food. Swilling down drink. She scowled down at them. Fat, ugly, lazy pinks, with no God but eating and idleness.

'Gardens,' she sneered.

There had been gardens in Uthman's palace. She used to look at them from the tiny window of her room. Her cell. Long before he became Uthman-ul-Dosht. When he had only been the Emperor's youngest son. When she had been one among his many slaves. His prisoner. Ferro leaned forward and spat out of the window.

She hated gardens.

She hated cities altogether. Places of slavery, fear, degradation. Their walls were the walls of a prison. The sooner she was gone from this accursed place the happier she would be. Or the less unhappy, at least. She turned away from the window, and scowled again. They were all staring at her.

The one called Bayaz was the first to speak. 'It certainly is quite a striking thing you've discovered, brother. You wouldn't miss her in a crowd, eh? Are you sure she's what I'm looking for?'

Yulwei looked at her for a minute. 'As sure as I can be.'

'I'm standing right here,' she growled at them, but the bald pink went on talking as though she couldn't hear.

'Does she feel pain?'

'But little. She fought an Eater on the road.'

'Really?' Bayaz chuckled softly to himself. 'How badly did it hurt her?'

'Badly, but in two days she was walking, in a week she was healed. She shows not a scratch from it. That is not normal.'

'We have both seen many things that are not normal in our times. We must be sure.' The bald man reached into a pocket. Ferro watched suspiciously as he pulled out his fist, placed it on the table. When he took it away two smooth, polished stones lay on the wood.

The bald man leaned forward. 'Tell me, Ferro, which is the blue stone?'

She stared at him, hard, then down at the stones. There was no difference between them. They were all watching her, closer than ever now, and she ground her teeth.

'That one.' She pointed to the one on the left.

Bayaz smiled. 'Exactly the answer I was hoping for.' Ferro shrugged her shoulders. Lucky, she thought, to guess the right one. Then she noticed the look on the big pink's face. He was frowning at the two stones, as though he didn't understand.

'They both are red,' said Bayaz. 'You see no colours at all, eh, Ferro?'

So the bald pink had played a trick on her. She wasn't sure how he could have known, but she was sure she didn't like it. No one plays tricks on Ferro

Maljinn. She started to laugh. A rough, ugly, unpractised gurgling.

Then she sprang across the table.

The look of surprise was just forming on the old pink's face as her fist crunched into his nose. He gave a grunt, chair tipping backwards, sprawling out onto the floor. She scrambled across the table to get at him, but Yulwei grabbed hold of her leg and dragged her back. Her clawing hands missed the bald bastard's neck and hauled the table over on its side instead, the two stones skittering away across the boards.

She shook her leg free and went for the old pink as he staggered up from the floor, but Yulwei caught her arm and pulled her back again, all the while yelling, 'Peace!' He got her elbow in his face for his trouble, and sagged back against the wall with her on top of him. She was first up, ready to go at the bald bastard again.

By now the big one was on his feet though, and moving forward, still watching her. Ferro smiled at him, fists clenched at her sides. Now she would see how dangerous he really was.

He took another step.

Then Bayaz put an arm out to stop him. He had his other hand clasped to his nose, trying to staunch the flow of blood. He started to chuckle.

'Very good!' He coughed. 'Very fierce, and damn quick too. Without a doubt, you're what we're after! I hope you will accept my apologies, Ferro.'

'What?'

'For my awful manners.' He wiped blood from his upper lip. 'I deserved no less, but I had to be sure. I am sorry. Am I forgiven?' He looked somehow different now, though nothing had changed. Friendly, considerate, honest. Sorry. But it took more than that to win her trust. A lot more.

'We'll see,' she hissed.

'That's all I ask. That, and that you give Yulwei and I a moment to discuss some . . . matters. Matters best discussed in private.'

'It's alright, Ferro,' said Yulwei, 'they are friends.' She was damn sure they weren't her friends, but she allowed him to shepherd her out of the door behind the two pinks. 'Just try not to kill any of them.'

This room was much like the other. They had to be rich, these pinks, for all they didn't look it. Great big fireplace, made of dark veined stone. Cushions, and soft cloth round the window, covered in flowers and birds in tiny stitches. There was a painting of a stern man with a crown on his head, frowning down at Ferro from the wall. She frowned back at him. Luxury.

Ferro hated luxury even more than she hated gardens.

Luxury meant captivity more surely than the bars of a cage. Soft furniture spelled danger more surely than weapons. Hard ground and cold water was all she needed. Soft things make you soft, and she wanted no part of that.

There was another man waiting in there, walking round and round with his hands behind his back, as though he didn't like to stand still too long. Not quite a pink, his leathery skin was somewhere between hers and theirs in tone. Head shaved, like a priest. Ferro didn't like that.

She hated priests most of all.

His eyes lit up when he saw her though, for all her sneering at him, and he hurried over. A strange little man in travel-worn clothes, the top of his head

came up no higher than Ferro's mouth. 'I am Brother Longfoot,' flapping his hands around all over the place, 'of the great order of Navigators.'

'Lucky for you.' Ferro turned her shoulder towards him, straining her ears to hear what the two old men were saying beyond the door, but Longfoot was not deterred.

'It is lucky! Yes, yes, it most certainly is! God has truly blessed me! I declare that never, in all of history, has a man been so well suited to his profession, or a profession to a man, as I, Brother Longfoot, am suited to the noble science of Navigation! From the snow-covered mountains of the far North, to the sun-drenched sands of the utmost South, the whole world is my home, truly!'

He smiled at her with a look of sickening self-satisfaction. Ferro ignored him. The two pinks, the big one and the scrawny one, were talking to each other on the far side of the room. They spoke in some language she didn't understand. Sounded like pigs grunting. Talking about her maybe, but she didn't care. They went out another door, leaving her alone with the priest, still flapping his lips.

'There are few nations within the Circle of the World to which I, Brother Longfoot, am a stranger, and yet I am at a loss as to your origins.' He waited expectantly, but Ferro said nothing. 'You would like me to guess, then? Indeed, it is a riddle. Let me see . . . your eyes have the shape of the people of distant Suljuk, where the black mountains rise sheer from the sparkling sea, indeed they do, and yet your skin is—'

'Stop your mouth, cunt.'

The man paused in mid-sentence, coughed and moved away, leaving Ferro to attend to the voices on the other side of the door. She smiled to herself. The wood was thick and the sounds were muffled, but the two old men had not reckoned on the sharpness of her ears. They were still speaking in Kantic. Now that idiot of a Navigator was quiet she could make out every word that Yulwei was saying.

' . . . Khalul breaks the Second Law, so you must break the First? I like it not, Bayaz! Juvens would never have allowed this!' Ferro frowned. Yulwei had a strange note in his voice. Fear. The Second Law. He had spoken of it to the Eaters, Ferro remembered. It is forbidden to eat the flesh of men.

She heard the bald pink next. 'The First Law is a paradox. All magic comes from the Other Side, even ours. Whenever you change a thing you touch the world below, whenever you make a thing you borrow from the Other Side, and there is always a cost.'

'But the cost of this might be too high! It is a cursed thing, this Seed, a damned thing. Nothing but chaos grows from it! The sons of Euz, so great in wisdom and power, this Seed was the end of them, of all of them, in different ways. Are you wiser than Juvens, Bayaz? Are you more cunning than Kanedias? Are you stronger than Glustrod?'

'None of those, brother, but tell me . . . how many Eaters has Khalul made?'

A long pause. 'I cannot be sure.'

'How many?'

Another pause. 'Perhaps two hundred. Perhaps more. The priesthood scour the South for those with any promise. Faster and faster now he makes them, but most are young, and weak.'

‘Two hundred or more, and growing all the time. Many are weak, but among them are some that might be a match for you or I. Those that were Khalul’s apprentices in the Old Time – the one they called the East Wind, and those cursed bloody twins.’

‘Damn those bitches!’ Yulwei groaned.

‘Not to mention Mamun, whose lies began this chaos.’

‘The trouble was well rooted before he was even born, you know it, Bayaz. Still Mamun was in the Badlands. I felt him near. He is grown terrible strong.’

‘You know that I am right. Meanwhile, our numbers hardly grow.’

‘I thought this one, Quai, showed promise?’

‘We need only a hundred more like him and twenty years in which to train them. Then we might stand on equal terms. No, brother, no. We must use fire against fire.’

‘Even if the fire burns you and all creation to ashes? Let me go to Sarkant. Khalul might yet hear reason—’

Laughter. ‘He has enslaved half the world! When will you wake, Yulwei? When he has enslaved the rest of it? I cannot afford to lose you, brother!’

‘Remember, Bayaz, there are worse things than Khalul. Far worse.’ His voice dropped to a whisper and Ferro strained to hear. ‘The Tellers of Secrets are always listening ...’

‘Enough, Yulwei! It is better not even to think of it!’ Ferro frowned. What was this nonsense? Tellers of Secrets? What secrets?

‘Remember what Juvens told you, Bayaz. Beware of pride. You have been using the Art. I know it. I see a shadow on you.’

‘Damn your shadows! I do what I must! Remember what Juvens told *you*, Yulwei. One cannot watch forever. Time is short, and I will watch no longer. I am first. It is my decision to make.’

‘Have I not always followed where you have led? Always, even when my conscience told me otherwise?’

‘And have I ever led you wrong?’

‘That remains to be seen. You are first, Bayaz, but you are not Juvens. It is my part to question, and that of Zacharus too. He will like this still less than I. Far less.’

‘It must be done.’

‘But others will pay the price, as they always have. This Northman, Ninefingers, he can speak to the spirits?’

‘Yes.’ Ferro frowned. Spirits? The nine-fingered pink had scarcely looked as if he could speak to other humans.

‘And if you find the Seed,’ came Yulwei’s voice from behind the door, ‘you mean for Ferro to carry it?’

‘She has the blood, and someone must.’

‘Be careful then, Bayaz. I know you, remember. Few better. Give me your word that you will keep her safe, even after she has served your purpose.’

‘I will guard her more closely than I would my own child.’

‘Guard her closer than you did the Maker’s child, and I will be satisfied.’

A long silence. Ferro worked her jaw as she thought on what she had heard. Juvens, Kanedias, Zacharus – the strange names meant nothing to her. And what kind of seed could burn all creation to ashes? She wanted no part of any

such thing, she was sure of that. Her place was in the south, fighting the Gurkish with weapons that she understood.

The door opened, and the two old men stepped through. They could hardly have looked more different. One dark-skinned, tall and bony with long hair, the other white-skinned, heavy-built and bald. She looked at them suspiciously. It was the white one who spoke first.

‘Ferro, I have an offer to—’

‘I am not going with you, old pink fool.’

The slightest shadow of annoyance flitted across the bald man’s face, but was quickly mastered. ‘Why? What other business have you which is so very pressing?’

‘That needed no thinking about. ‘Vengeance.’ Her favourite word.

‘Ah. I see. You hate the Gurkish?’

‘Yes.’

‘They owe you a debt, for what they have done to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘For taking your family, your people, your country?’

‘Yes.’

‘For making you a slave,’ he whispered. She glowered back at him, wondering how he knew so much about her, wondering whether to go for him again. ‘They have robbed you, Ferro, robbed you of everything. They have stolen your life from you. If I were you . . . if I had suffered as you have suffered . . . there would not be enough blood in all the South to satisfy me. I would see every Gurkish soldier made a corpse before I was satisfied. I would see every Gurkish city burn before I was satisfied. I would see their Emperor rotting in a cage before his own palace before I was satisfied!’

‘Yes!’ she hissed, a fierce smile across her face. He was talking her language now. Yulwei had never talked so – perhaps this old pink wasn’t so bad after all. ‘You understand! That is why I must go south!’

‘No, Ferro.’ It was the bald man grinning now. ‘You do not realise the chance that I am offering you. The Emperor does not truly rule in Kanta. Mighty though he seems, he dances to the tune of another, a hand well hidden. Khalul, they call him.’

‘The Prophet.’

Bayaz nodded. ‘If you are cut, do you hate the knife, or the one who wields it? The Emperor, the Gurkish, they are but Khalul’s tools, Ferro. Emperors come and go, but the Prophet is always there, behind them. Whispering. Suggesting. Ordering. He is the one that owes you.’

‘Khalul . . . yes.’ The Eaters had used that name. Khalul. The Prophet. The Emperor’s palace was filled with priests, everyone knew it. The palaces of the governors too. Priests, they were everywhere, swarming, like insects. In the cities, in the villages, in amongst the soldiers, always spreading their lies. Whispering. Suggesting. Ordering. Yulwei was frowning, unhappy, but Ferro knew that the old pink was right. ‘Yes, I see it!’

‘Help me, and I will give you vengeance, Ferro. Real vengeance. Not one dead soldier, or ten, but thousands. Tens of thousands! Perhaps the Emperor himself, who knows?’ He shrugged, and half turned away from her. ‘Still, I cannot force you. Go back to the Badlands, if you wish – hide, and run, and

grub in the dust like a rat. If that satisfies you. If that is the full measure of your vengeance. The Eaters want you now. Khalul's children. Without us they will have you, and sooner rather than later. Still, the choice is yours.'

Ferro frowned. All those years in the wilderness, fighting tooth and nail, always running, had got her nothing. No vengeance worthy of the word. If it had not been for Yulwei, she would be finished now. White bones in the desert. Meat in the bellies of the Eaters. In the cage before the Emperor's palace.

Rotting.

She could not say no, and she knew it, but she did not like it. This old man had known exactly what to offer her. She hated to have no choice.

'I will think about it,' she said.

Again, the slightest shadow of anger on the bald pink's face, quickly covered. 'Think about it then, but not for long. The Emperor's soldiers are massing, and time is short.' He followed the others out of the room, leaving her alone with Yulwei.

'I do not like these pinks,' she said, loud enough for the old one to hear her in the corridor, and then more softly. 'Do we have to go with them?'

'You do. I must return to the South.'

'What?'

'Someone must keep watch on the Gurmish.'

'No!'

Yulwei began to laugh. 'Twice you have tried to kill me. Once you have tried to run away from me, but now that I am leaving you want me to stay? There's no understanding you, Ferro.'

She frowned. 'This bald one says he can give me vengeance. Does he lie?'

'No.'

'Then I must go with him.'

'I know. That is why I brought you here.'

She could think of nothing to say. She looked down at the floor, but Yulwei surprised her by stepping forward suddenly. She raised her hand, to ward off a blow, but instead he put his arms round her and squeezed her tightly. A strange feeling. Being so close to someone else. Warm. Then Yulwei stepped away, one hand on her shoulder. 'Walk in God's footsteps, Ferro Maljinn.'

'Huh. They have no God here.'

'Say rather that they have many.'

'Many?'

'Had you not noticed? Here, each man worships himself.' She nodded. That seemed close to the truth. 'Be careful, Ferro. And listen to Bayaz. He is the first of my order, and few indeed are wise as he.'

'I do not trust him.'

Yulwei leaned closer. 'I did not tell you to trust him.' Then he smiled, and turned his back. She watched him walk slowly to the door, then out into the corridor. She heard his bare feet flapping away on the tiles, the bangles on his arms jingling softly.

Leaving her alone with the luxury, and the gardens, and the pinks.

Old Friends

There was a thumping knock at the door, and Glokta jerked his head up, left eye suddenly twitching. *Who the hell comes knocking at this hour? Frost? Severard? Or someone else? Superior Goyle, maybe, come to pay me a visit with his circus freaks? Might the Arch Lector have grown tired of his toy cripple already? One could hardly say the feast went according to plan, and his Eminence is hardly the forgiving type. Body found floating by the docks . . .*

The knocking came again. Loud, confident knocking. *The kind that demands the door be opened, before it's broken down.* 'I'm coming!' he shouted, voice cracking slightly as he prised himself out from behind his table, legs wobbly. 'I'm just coming!' He snatched up his cane and limped to the front door, took a deep breath and fumbled with the latch.

It was not Frost, or Severard. Nor was it Goyle, or one of his freakish Practicals. It was someone much more unexpected. Glokta raised an eyebrow, then leaned against the door frame. 'Major West, what a surprise.'

Sometimes, when old friends meet, things are instantly as they were all those years before. The friendship resumes, untouched, as though there had been no interruption. *Sometimes, but not now.* 'Inquisitor Glokta,' mumbled West – hesitant, awkward, embarrassed. 'I'm sorry to bother you so late.'

'Don't mention it,' said Glokta with icy formality.

The Major nearly winced. 'May I come in?'

'Of course.' Glokta shut the front door behind him, then limped after West into his dining room. The Major squeezed himself into one of the chairs and Glokta took another. They sat there facing each other for a moment, without speaking. *What the hell does he want, at this hour or any other?* Glokta scrutinised his old friend's face in the glow from the fire and the one, flickering candle. Now that he could see him more clearly, he realised West had changed. *He looks old.* His hair was thinning at the temples, going grey round his ears. His face was pale, pinched, slightly hollow. *He looks worried. Ground down. Close to the edge.* West looked round at the mean room, the mean fire, the mean furniture, cautiously up at Glokta, then quickly down at the floor. Nervous, as if he had something picking at his mind. *He looks ill at ease. As well he might.*

He did not seem ready to break the silence, so Glokta did it for him. 'So, how long has it been, eh? Apart from that night in town, and we can hardly count that, can we?'

The memory of that unfortunate meeting hung between them for a moment like a fart, then West cleared his throat. 'Nine years.'

'Nine years. Imagine that. Since we stood on the ridge, old friends together, looking down towards the river. Down towards the bridge and all those Gurkish on the other side. Seems a lifetime ago, doesn't it? Nine years. I can remember you pleading with me not to go down there, but I was having none

of it. What a fool I was, eh? Thought I was our only hope. Thought I was invincible.'

'You saved us all that day, saved the whole army.'

'Did I? How wonderful. I daresay if I'd died on that bridge there'd be statues of me all over the place. Shame I didn't, really. Shame for everyone.'

West winced and shifted in his chair, looking ever more uncomfortable. 'I looked for you, afterwards . . . ' he mumbled.

You looked for me? How hugely fucking noble. What a true friend. Precious little good it did me, dragged off in agony with my leg hacked to mincemeat. And that was just the beginning. 'You did not come to discuss old times, West.'

'No . . . no, I didn't. I came about my sister.'

Glokta paused. He had certainly not expected that answer. 'Ardee?'

'Ardee, yes. I'm leaving for Angland soon and . . . I was hoping that, perhaps, you could keep an eye on her for me, while I'm away.' West's eyes flickered up nervously. 'You always had a way with women . . . Sand.' Glokta grimaced at the sound of his first name. No one called him that anymore. *No one besides my mother.* 'You always knew just what to say. Do you remember those three sisters? What were their names? You had them all eating out of your hand.' West smiled, but Glokta couldn't.

He remembered, but the memories were weak now, colourless, faded. *The memories of another man. A dead man. My life began in Gurkhul, in the Emperor's prisons. The memories since then are much more real. Stretched out in bed like a corpse after I came back, in the darkness, waiting for friends who never came.* He looked at West, and he knew that his glance was terribly cold. *Do you think to win me with your honest face and your talk of old times? Like a long-lost dog, at last come faithfully home? I know better. You stink, West. You smell like betrayal. That memory at least is mine.*

Glokta leaned back slowly in his chair. 'Sand dan Glokta,' he murmured, as though recalling a name he once knew. 'Whatever became of him, eh, West? You know, that friend of yours, that dashing young man, handsome, proud, fearless? Magic touch with the women? Loved and respected by all, destined for great things? Wherever did he go?'

West looked back, puzzled and unsure of himself, and said nothing.

Glokta lurched towards him, hands spread out on the table, lips curling back to show his ruined mouth. 'Dead! He died on the bridge! And what remains? A fucking ruin with his name! A limping, skulking shadow! A crippled ghost, clinging to life the way the smell of piss clings to a beggar. He has no friends, this loathsome fucking remnant, and he wants none! Get you gone, West! Go back to Varuz, and to Luthar, and the rest of those empty bastards! There's no one here you know!' Glokta's lips trembled and spat with revulsion. He wasn't sure who disgusted him more – West, or himself.

The Major blinked, his jaw muscles working silently. He got shakily to his feet. 'I'm sorry,' he said, over his shoulder.

'Tell me!' shouted Glokta, bringing him up short of the door. 'The rest of them, they stuck to me so long as I was useful, so long as I was going up. I always knew it. I wasn't so very surprised they wanted nothing to do with me when I came back. But you, West, I always thought you were a better friend than that, a better man. I always thought that you at least – you alone – would

come to visit me.' He shrugged. 'I suppose I was wrong.' Glokta turned away, frowning towards the fire, waiting for the sound of the front door closing.

'She didn't tell you?'

Glokta looked back. 'Who?'

'Your mother.'

He snorted. 'My mother? Tell me what?'

'I did come. Twice. As soon as I learned that you were back, I came. Your mother turned me away at the gates of your estate. She said that you were too ill to take visitors, and that in any case you wanted nothing more to do with the army, and nothing more to do with me in particular. I came back again, a few months later. I thought I owed you that much. That time a servant came to see me off. Later I heard that you had joined the Inquisition, and left for Angland. I put you out of my mind . . . until we met . . . that night in the city . . . ' West trailed off.

It took a while for his words to sink in, and by the time they had, Glokta realised that his mouth was hanging open. *So simple. No conspiracy. No web of betrayal.* He almost wanted to laugh at the stupidity of it. *My mother turned him away at the gate, and I never thought to doubt that no one came. She always hated West. A most unsuitable friend, far beneath her precious son. No doubt she blamed him for what happened to me. I should have guessed, but I was too busy wallowing in pain and bitterness. Too busy being tragic.* He swallowed. 'You came?'

West shrugged. 'For what it's worth.'

Well. What can we do, except try to do better? Glokta blinked, and took a deep breath. 'I'm, er . . . I'm sorry. Forget what I said, if you can. Please. Sit down. You were saying something about your sister.'

'Yes. Yes. My sister.' West fumbled his way back to his seat, looking down at the floor, his face taking on that worried, guilty look again. 'We're leaving for Angland soon, and I don't know when I'll be back . . . or if, I suppose . . . she'll be without any friends in the city and, well . . . I think you met her once, when you came to our house.'

'Of course, and a good deal more recently than that, in fact.'

'You did?'

'Yes. With our mutual friend, Captain Luthar.'

West turned even paler. *There is something more to this than he is telling me.* But Glokta did not feel like putting his club foot through his one friendship quite yet, not so soon after it had been reborn. He stayed quiet, and after a moment the Major went on.

'Life has been . . . difficult for her. I could have done something. I should have done something.' He stared miserably down at the table and an ugly spasm ran across his face. *I know that one. One of my own favourites. Self-loathing.* 'But I chose to let other things get in the way, and I did my best to forget all about it, and I pretended that everything was fine. She has suffered and I am to blame.' He coughed, then swallowed awkwardly. His lip began to tremble and he covered his face with his hands. 'My fault . . . if something were to happen to her . . . ' His shoulders shook silently, and Glokta raised his eyebrows. He was used to men crying in his presence of course. *But I usually have at least to show them the instruments first.*

'Come on, Collem, this isn't like you.' He reached slowly across the table,

half pulled his hand back, and then patted his sobbing friend awkwardly on the shoulder. 'You've made some mistakes, but haven't we all? They're in the past, and can't be changed. There's nothing to be done now except to do better, eh?' *What? Can it really be me talking? Inquisitor Glokta, comforter of the needy?* But West seemed reassured. He lifted his head, wiped his runny nose, stared up hopefully at Glokta with wet eyes.

'You're right, you're right, of course. I have to make amends. Have to! Will you help me, Sand? Will you look after her, while I'm gone?'

'I'll do whatever I can for her, Collem, you can depend on me. I was once proud to call you my friend and . . . I would be again.' Strange, but Glokta could almost feel a tear in his own eye. *Me? Can it be? Inquisitor Glokta, trustworthy friend? Inquisitor Glokta, protector of vulnerable young women?* He almost laughed out loud at the idea, and yet here he was. He never would have thought that he needed one, but it felt good to have a friend again.

'Hollit,' said Glokta.

'What?'

'Those three sisters, their name was Hollit.' He chuckled to himself, the memory filtering through a little clearer than before. 'They had a thing about fencing. Loved it. Something about the sweat, maybe.'

'I think that was when I decided to take it up.' West laughed, then screwed up his face as if he was trying to remember something. 'What was our quartermaster's name? He had a thing for the youngest one, was out of his mind with jealousy. What the hell was that man's name? Fat man.'

The name was not so very difficult for Glokta to recall. 'Rews. Salem Rews.'

'Rews, that's the one! I'd forgotten all about him. Rews! He could tell a story like no one else, that man. We'd sit up all night listening to him, all of us rolling with laughter! Whatever became of him?'

Glokta paused for a moment. 'I think he left the army . . . to become a merchant of some sort.' He waved his hand dismissively. 'I heard he moved north.'

Back to the Mud

Carleon weren't at all how the Dogman remembered it, but then he tended to remember it burning. A memory like that stays with you. Roofs falling in, windows cracking, crowds of fighters everywhere, all drunk on pain and winning and, well, drink – looting, killing, setting fires, all the unpleasant rest of it. Women screaming, men shouting, stinking with smoke and fear. In short, a sack, with him and Logen at the heart of it.

Bethod had put the fires out and made it his. Moved in, then started building. He hadn't got far when he kicked Logen and the Dogman and the rest of them into exile, but they must have been building every day since. It was twice as big now as it used to be, even before it got burned, covering the whole hill and all the slope down to the river. Bigger than Uffrith. Bigger than any city the Dogman had seen. From where he was, up in the trees on the other side of the valley, you couldn't see the people, but there had to be an awful lot of them in there. Three new roads leading out from the gates. Two big new bridges. New buildings everywhere, and big ones where the small ones used to be. Lots of them. Built from stone, mostly, slate roofs, glass in some of the windows even.

'They been busy,' said Threetrees.

'New walls,' said Grim.

'Lots of 'em,' muttered the Dogman. There were walls all over. There was a big one round the outside, with proper towers and everything, and a big ditch beyond it. There was an even bigger one round the top of the hill where Skarling's Hall used to stand. Huge great thing. Dogman could hardly work out where they got all the stone for the building of it. 'Biggest damn wall I ever saw,' he said.

Threetrees shook his head. 'I don't like it. If Forley gets took, we won't never get him out.'

'If Forley gets took there'll be five of us, chief, and we'll be looked for. He's no threat to no one, but we are. Getting him out'll be the least of our worries. He'll muddle through, like always. Most likely he'll outlive the lot of us.'

'Wouldn't surprise me,' muttered Threetrees. 'We're in a dangerous line of work.'

They slithered back through the brush, back to the camp. Black Dow was there, looking even worse-tempered than usual. Tul Duru too, working at a hole in his coat with a needle, face all screwed up as his great thick fingers fumbled with the little splinter of metal. Forley was sat near him, looking up at the sky through the leaves.

'How you feeling Forley?' asked the Dogman.

'Bad, but you got to have fear to have courage.'

Dogman grinned at him. 'So I heard. Reckon we're both heroes then, eh?'

'Must be,' he said, grinning back.

Threetrees was all business. 'You sure about this, Forley? Sure you want to go in there? Once you get in, there might be no getting out, no matter how good a talker y'are.'

'I'm sure. I may be shittin' myself, but I'm going. I can do more good there than I can out here. Someone's got to warn 'em about the Shanka. You know it, chief. Who else is there?'

The old boy nodded to himself, slow as the sun rising. Taking his moment, as always. 'Aye. Alright. Tell 'em I'm waiting here, by the old bridge. Tell 'em I'm alone. Just in case Bethod decides you're not welcome, you understand?'

'I get it. You're on your own, Threetrees. It was just the two of us made it back over the mountains.'

They'd all gathered now, and Forley smiled round at 'em. 'Well then, lads, it's been something ain't it?'

'Shut up, Weakest,' scowled Dow. 'Bethod ain't got nothing against you. You're coming back.'

'In case I don't, though. It's been something.' The Dogman nodded to him, awkward. It was the same dirty, scarred-up faces as usual, but grimmer than ever. None of 'em liked letting one of their own put himself in danger, but Forley was right, someone had to do it, and he was the best suited. Sometimes weakness is a better shield than strength, the Dogman reckoned. Bethod was an evil bastard, but he was a clever one. The Shanka were coming, and he needed the warning. Hopefully, he'd be grateful for it.

They walked together, down to the edge of the trees, looking out towards the path. It crossed over the old bridge and wound down into the valley. From there to the gates of Carleon. Into Bethod's fortress.

Forley took a deep breath, and the Dogman clapped him on his shoulder. 'Luck, Forley. Good luck.'

'And to you.' He squeezed Dogman's hand in his for a minute. 'To all of you lads, eh?' and he turned and marched off towards the bridge, with his head up high.

'Luck, Forley!' shouted Black Dow, startling them all.

He turned round for a minute, the Weakest, stood on top of the bridge, and he grinned. Then he was gone.

Threetrees took a deep breath. 'Weapons,' he said, 'just in case Bethod don't want to hear sense. And wait for the signal, eh?'

It seemed a long time waiting, up in the leaves, staying quiet and still, looking down at all them new walls. The Dogman lay on his belly, bow near at hand, watching, waiting, wondering how Forley was doing in there. A long, tense time. Then he saw them. Horsemen coming out the nearest gate, riding over one of the new bridges, crossing the river. They'd got a cart at the back. Dogman wasn't sure why they'd have a cart, but he didn't like it any. No sign of Forley, and he wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or a bad.

They came quick, spurring up the side of the valley, up the steep path towards the trees and the stream and the old stone bridge across it. Right at the Dogman. He could hear the hooves thumping on the dirt. Close enough to count now, and take a good look at. Spears, shields and good armour. Helmets and mail. Ten of 'em, and two others sitting on the cart, either side of the driver, carrying some sorts of things that looked like little bows on blocks of

wood. He didn't know what they were about, and he didn't like not knowing. He was the one wanted to be giving them the surprises.

He wriggled back through the brush on his stomach, sloshed through the stream and hurried to the edge of the trees, where he could get a good view of the old bridge. Threetrees, Tul and Dow were standing round the near side of it, and he waved over to them. Couldn't see Grim, he must've been off in the woods away beyond. He made the sign for horsemen, held up his fist to say ten, hand flat on his chest to say armour.

Dow took up his sword and axe, ran up into a bunch of broken rocks, high up beside the bridge, keeping low and quiet. Tul slid down the bank into the stream, luckily no more than knee-deep right then, plastered his big self against the far side of the arch with his great long sword held up above the water. Made the Dogman a bit nervous, he could see Tul so clear from where he was sitting. Still, the riders wouldn't see him at all if they came straight up the path. They'd only be expecting one man alone, and Dogman hoped they wouldn't come too careful. He hoped, 'cause if they took the time to check it'd be a fucking disaster.

He watched Threetrees strap his shield on his arm, draw his sword, stretch his neck out, then he just stood, waiting, big and solid, blocking the path on the near side of the bridge, seeming all alone in the world.

The Dogman could hear the hoof-beats loud now, and the clattering of the cart's wheels out beyond the trees. He pulled out a few arrows and planted them in the earth, point down, where he could get to 'em quick. Doing his best to swallow his fear. His fingers were shaking all the while, but that didn't matter. They'd work alright when they needed to.

'Wait for the signal,' he whispered to himself. 'Wait for the signal.'

He nocked a shaft to his bow and half-drew the string, taking aim down towards the bridge. Damn it but he needed to piss bad.

The first spear-point showed itself over the crest of the hill, then others. Bobbing helmets, mailed chests, horses' faces, bit by bit the riders came up towards the bridge. The cart rolled behind, with its driver and its two funny passengers, pulled by a big shaggy carthorse.

The rider up front saw Threetrees now, waiting for him, over the hump of the bridge, and he spurred on forward. The Dogman breathed a little easier as the others trotted after him in a clump, all eagerness. Forley must've said as he was told – they were expecting only one. Dogman could see Tul peering up from underneath the mossy arch as the horses clopped above him. By the dead, his hands were shaking. He was worried he'd let the arrow fly half-drawn and ruin the whole thing.

The cart stopped on the far bank, the two men on it stood up and pointed their strange bows at Threetrees. The Dogman got himself a nice aim on one of 'em, and drew the string back all the way. Most of the riders were on the bridge by now, horses shying and stirring about, unhappy at being packed in so tight. The one at the front reined up in front of Threetrees, spear pointing at him. The old boy didn't back away a step, though. Not him. He just frowned up, not giving the riders any room to get around him, keeping 'em choked up on the bridge.

'Well, well,' the Dogman heard their leader saying. 'Rudd Threetrees. We

thought you was long dead, old man.' He knew the voice. One of Bethod's Carls, from way back. Bad-Enough they called him.

'Reckon I've got a fight or two left in me,' said Threetrees, still giving no ground.

Bad-Enough took a look about him, squinting into the trees, sense enough to see he was in a poor position, but not too careful. 'Where's the rest of you? Where's that fucker Dow, eh?'

Threetrees shrugged. 'There's just me.'

'Back to the mud, eh?' The Dogman could just see Bad-Enough grinning under his helmet. 'Shame. Hoped I'd be the one to kill that dirty bastard.'

Dogman winced, half expecting Dow to come flying out of those rocks right then, but there was no sign of him. Not yet. Waiting for the signal, for once.

'Where's Bethod?' asked Threetrees.

'The King don't come out for the likes of you! Anyhow, he's off in England, kicking the Union's arses. Prince Calder's taking care of things while he's gone.'

Threetrees snorted. 'Prince is it, now? I remember him sucking on his mother's tit. He could scarcely do that right.'

'A lot's changed, old man. All kind of things.'

By the dead, Dogman was wishing they'd get on with it, one way or another. He could hardly keep the piss in. 'Wait for the signal,' he was mouthing to himself, just to try and keep his hands steady.

'The Flatheads are everywhere,' Threetrees was saying. 'They'll be coming south by next summer, sooner maybe. Something needs doing.'

'Well, why don't you come with us, eh? You can warn Calder yourself. We brought a cart, for you to ride in. Man of your age shouldn't have to walk.' A couple of the other riders laughed at that, but Threetrees didn't join 'em.

'Where's Forley?' he growled. 'Where's the Weakest?'

There was more sniggering from the horsemen. 'Oh, he's nearby,' said Bad-Enough, 'he's real close. Why don't you get in the cart, and we'll take you right to him. Then we can all sit round and talk about Flatheads, nice and peaceful.'

The Dogman didn't like this. Not at all. He'd got a nasty feeling. 'You must take me for some new kind o' fool,' said Threetrees. 'I'm going nowhere 'til I've seen Forley.'

Bad-Enough frowned at that. 'You're in no state to be telling us what you'll do. You might have been the big man once, but you're come to less than nothing, and that's a fact. Now give up your blade and get in the fucking cart like I told you, before I lose my temper.'

He tried to nudge his horse forward again but Threetrees wasn't budging. 'Where's Forley?' he growled. 'And I'll have a straight answer or I'll have your guts.'

Bad-Enough grinned over his shoulder at his mates, and they grinned back. 'Alright, old man, since you're asking. Calder wanted us to wait for this, but I've got to see the look on your face. The Weakest's in the cart. Leastways, most of him is.' He smiled and let something drop from his saddle. A canvas sack, with something in it. Dogman could guess already what it was. It hit the ground near Threetrees' feet. The something rolled out, and the Dogman could

see on the old boy's face that he'd guessed right. Forley's head.

Well that was it, o' course. Fuck the signal. Dogman's first arrow stuck one of the men on the cart right through his chest, and he screamed and tumbled over into the back, dragging the driver with him. It was a good shot, but there was no time to think on that, he was far too busy fumbling for another arrow, and shouting. Didn't even know what he was shouting, just that he was. Grim must've been shooting as well, one of the Carls on the bridge gave a yell, fell off his horse and splashed into the stream.

Threetrees was down in a crouch, hiding behind his shield, backing off while Bad-Enough prodded at him with his spear, kicking his horse off the bridge and onto the path on our side.

The rider behind pushed around the side of him, keen to get off the bridge, coming close beside the rocks.

'Fucking bastards!' Dow flew out of the stones above him, barrelled into the rider. They tumbled down together, a mess of limbs and weapons, but the Dogman could see that Dow was on top. His axe went up and down a couple of times, quick. One less to worry on.

Dogman's second arrow went well wide of the mark, he was so busy shouting his head off, but it stuck one of the horses in the rump, and that turned out better than anything. It started rearing and thrashing about, and soon all the horses were milling and crying while their riders cursed and bumbled around, spears going every which way, noise and mess on all sides.

The horseman at the back split in half, all of a sudden, blood spraying everywhere. The Thunderhead had come up from the stream, got round behind them. There's no armour that could stop a blow like that. The giant roared and swung the great length of bloody metal over his head again. The next in line got his shield up in time, but he might as well not have bothered. The blade hacked a big chunk out of it, tore his head open and hammered him out of the saddle. The blow was that strong it clubbed the horse down too.

One of them had got his mount turned now, bringing up his spear to stab at Tul from the side. Before he could he grunted and jerked, arching his back. Dogman could see the feathers sticking from his side. Grim must've shot him, and he tumbled down. His foot caught in the stirrup and he hung there, swinging. He was groaning and moaning and trying to right himself, but his horse was plunging now along with the others, making him dance, wrong way up, smacking his head against the side of the bridge. He dropped his spear in the stream, tried to pull himself up, then his horse half landed a kick on his shoulder and knocked him free. He went down under the milling hooves and the Dogman paid him no more mind.

The second archer was still sitting up on the cart. He was getting over his shock now, and lining up his funny bow on Threetrees, still squatting down behind his shield. Dogman shot at him but he was hurrying, and yelling, and his shaft missed and hit the driver beside him in his shoulder, just got up from the back of the cart, knocked him back down again.

The weird bow twanged and Threetrees jerked back from his shield. The Dogman was worried for a minute, then he saw that the arrow split the heavy wood and punched on through, but stopped just short of catching Threetrees in the face. It was lodged there through his shield, feathers sticking out one

side, point out the other. That's an evil little bow, Dogman thought.

He heard Tul roar and saw another rider fly off into the stream. Another dropped with one of Grim's arrows in his back. Dow turned and chopped the back legs out from under Bad-Enough's horse with his sword, and it stumbled and slid, pitching him off onto the ground. The last couple were trapped. Dow and Threetrees at one end of the bridge, Tul at the other, too tight with frightened, riderless horses for them to turn around or nothing, at the mercy of Grim out in the woods. He wasn't in a merciful mood, it seemed, and it didn't take him long to pick 'em off.

The one with the bow tried to make a break for it, chucking his bit of wood away and jumping down from the cart. Dogman thought nice and careful about his aiming this time, and his shaft got the archer right between the shoulders and knocked him on his face before he could get more than a few paces. He had a go at crawling, but he wasn't crawling far. The driver of the cart showed his face again, groaning and grabbing at the arrow in his shoulder. The Dogman didn't usually kill men that were down, but he reckoned today was an exception. His arrow got the driver through the mouth, and that was him dealt with.

Dogman could see one of the riders limping away, one of Grim's arrows in his leg, and lined him up with his last shaft. Threetrees got there first though, and stuck him through the back with his sword. There was another one still moving, struggling up to his knees, and the Dogman took an aim on him. Before he could loose, Dow stepped up and hacked his head off. Blood everywhere. Horses still milling, screaming, slipping on the slick stones of the bridge.

Dogman could see Bad-Enough now, the last one going. He must've lost his helmet when he fell off his horse. He was struggling in the stream on his hands and knees, slowed up by all that weight of mail. He'd dropped his shield, and his spear, to make better time running for it, but he hadn't realised he was coming right at the Dogman.

'Get him alive!' shouted Threetrees. Tul set off down one bank, but he was making slow progress, slipping and sliding in the mud the cart churned up. 'Get him alive!' Dow was after him too, splashing and cursing in the water. Bad-Enough was close now. The Dogman could hear his scared gasping as he struggled down the stream.

'Aah!' he howled as Dogman's arrow thudded into his leg, just below the bottom of his mail coat. He toppled sideways onto the bank, blood leaking into the muddy water. He started dragging himself up the wet turf beside the stream.

'That's it, Dogman,' shouted Threetrees. 'Alive!'

The Dogman slid out the trees and down the bank, through the water. He pulled his knife out. Tul and Dow were still a little ways off, hurrying towards him. Bad-Enough rolled over in the mud, his face screwed up with the pain of the arrow in his leg. He held his hands up. 'Alright, alright, I'll gurr—'

'You'll what?' asked the Dogman, looking down at him.

'Gurr—' he said again, looking mightily surprised, hand gripped to his neck. There was blood pouring out between his fingers, down the front of his wet mail.

Dow splashed up beside them and stood there, looking down. 'Well that's the end of that,' he said.

'What you do that for?' shouted Threetrees, hurrying over.

'Eh?' asked the Dogman. Then he looked down at his knife. It was all bloody. 'Ah.' That's when he saw it was him as had cut Bad-Enough's throat.

'We could have asked him questions!' said Threetrees. 'He could have took a message back to Calder, told him who did this, and why!'

'Wake up, chief,' muttered Tul Duru, already wiping his sword down. 'No one cares a shit for the old ways no more. Besides, they'll be after us soon enough. No point letting 'em know more than we have to.'

Dow clapped the Dogman on the shoulder. 'You were right to do it. This bastard's head'll do for a message.' Dogman wasn't sure Dow's approval was something he was after, but it was a bit late now. It took Dow a couple of chops to get Bad-Enough's head off. He carried it, swinging by its hair, with as little care or worry as he'd carry a bag of turnips. He grabbed a spear out of the stream on his way, found a spot he liked.

'Things ain't the way they used to be,' Threetrees was muttering as he strode off down the bank towards the bridge, where Grim was already picking over the bodies.

The Dogman followed him, watching Dow stick Bad-Enough's head on the spear, shoving the blunt end into the ground, stepping back, hands on hips, to admire his work. He shifted it a bit to the right, then back to the left, until he'd got it nice and straight. He grinned over at the Dogman.

'Perfect,' he said.

'What now, chief?' Tul was asking. 'What now?'

Threetrees was stooping down on the bank, washing his bloody hands in the river.

'What do we do?' asked Dow.

The old boy stood up slowly, wiped his hands on his coat, taking his time thinking on it. 'South. We bury Forley on the way. We take these horses here, since they'll be coming after us now, and we head south. Tul, you better unhitch that carthorse, he's the only one as'll carry you.'

'South?' asked the Thunderhead, looking confused, 'south to where?'

'Angland.'

'Angland?' asked the Dogman, and he could tell they were all thinking it. 'For what? Ain't they fighting down there?'

'Course they are, that's why I've a mind to go.'

Dow frowned. 'Us? What have we got against the Union?'

'No, fool,' said Threetrees, 'I've a mind to fight along with 'em.'

'With the Union?' asked Tul, his lip curling up, 'with those bloody women? That ain't our fight, chief!'

'Any fight against Bethod is my fight now. I mean to see the end of him.' Once he'd thought on it, the Dogman had never yet seen Threetrees change his mind. Never once. 'Who's with me?' he asked.

They all were. Course.

It was raining. Thin rain, making the whole world damp. Soft as a maiden's kiss, as they say, though the Dogman could hardly remember what one of those felt like. Rain. Seemed right somehow, for the occasion. Dow was done

with piling the dirt, and he sniffed and dug the spade down into the earth beside the grave.

It was a long way from the road. A good long way. They didn't want no one finding it and digging Forley up. They all gathered round, just five now, looking down. It was a long time since they'd had anyone to bury among them. The Shanka got Logen o' course, not too long ago, but they never had found the body. There might have been just one less in the band, but it seemed to the Dogman like there was a lot missing.

Threetrees frowned, taking a moment, thinking out what to say. It was just as well he was the chief, and had to find the words, 'cause Dogman didn't reckon he could have found a thing. After a minute Threetrees started speaking, slow as the light fading at sunset.

'This was a weak man, here. The Weakest, that's a fact. That was his name, and ain't that a joke? To call a man the Weakest. The worst fighter they could find, to surrender to Ninefingers. Weak fighter, no doubt, but strong heart, say I.'

'Aye,' said Grim.

'Strong heart,' said Tul Duru.

'The strongest,' mumbled the Dogman. He had a bit of a lump in the throat, being honest.

Threetrees nodded to himself. 'It takes some bones to meet your death as well as he did. To walk to it, with no complaint. To ask for it. And not for his own sake, but for others, that he didn't even know.' Threetrees clenched his teeth and took his moment, looking down at the earth. They all did. 'That's all I've got to say. Back to the mud with you, Forley. We're the poorer, and the ground's the richer for it.'

Dow knelt down, and set his hand on the fresh-turned soil. 'Back to the mud,' he said. The Dogman thought for a minute there might be a tear dripping off his nose, but it had to be only the rain. This was Black Dow, after all. He got up and walked away with his head down and the others followed him, one by one, off toward the horses.

'Fare you well, Forley,' said the Dogman. 'No more fear.'

He reckoned now that he was the coward of the band.

Misery

Jeza! frowned. Ardee was taking her time. She never took her time. She was always there when he arrived, at whatever spot had been arranged. He didn't like having to wait for her one bit. He always had to wait for her letters, and that rankled as it was. Standing here like an idiot, it made him feel even more of a slave than he did already.

He frowned up at the grey skies. There were a few spots of rain falling, just to match his mood. He felt one from time to time, a tiny pin-prick on his face. He could see the drops making circles in the grey surface of the lake, making pale streaks against the green of the trees, the grey of the buildings. The dark shape of the House of the Maker was rendered hazy by them. He frowned at that building with particular displeasure.

He hardly knew what to make of it now. The whole thing had been like some feverish nightmare and, like a nightmare, he had decided simply to ignore it, and pretend it never happened. He might have succeeded too, except that the bloody thing was always looming on the edge of his vision, whenever he stepped out of the door, reminding him the world was full of mysteries he did not understand, seething just below the surface.

'Damn it,' he muttered, 'and damn that lunatic, Bayaz, as well.'

He frowned across the damp lawns. The rain was keeping people away from the park, and it was emptier than he had seen it in a long time. A couple of sad-looking men sat listlessly on benches, nursing their own personal tragedies, and there were passers-by on the paths, hurrying from somewhere to wherever. One was coming towards him now, wrapped up in a long cloak.

Jeza!'s frown vanished. It was her, he could tell. She had her hood pulled right down over her face. He knew it was a cold day, but this seemed a touch dramatic. He had never thought she was the type to be put off by a few spots of rain. Still, he was glad to see her. Ridiculously glad. He smiled and hastened forward. Then, when they were a couple of paces apart, she pushed the hood back.

Jeza! gasped with horror. There was a great purple bruise across her cheek, around her eye, the corner of her mouth! He stood there frozen for a moment, wishing, stupidly, that he was hurt instead of her. The pain would have been less. He realised he'd clamped one hand over his mouth, eyes bulging like a nervous little girl at a spider in the bath, but he couldn't stop himself.

Ardee only scowled. 'What? Did you never see a bruise before?'

'Well, yes, but . . . are you alright?'

'Of course I am.' She stepped around him and started walking off down the path. He had to hurry to catch her up. 'It's nothing. I fell is all. I'm a clumsy fool. Always have been. All my life.' She said it with some bitterness, it seemed to him.

'Is there anything I can do?'

'What could you do? Kiss it better?' If they'd been alone he wouldn't have minded trying, but her frown showed him what she thought of that idea. It was strange: the bruises should have repelled him, but they didn't. Not at all. Rather, he had an almost overpowering urge to take her in his arms, to stroke her hair, to murmur soothing words. Pathetic. Probably she would slap him if he tried. Probably he would deserve it. She didn't need his help. Besides, he couldn't touch her. There were people around, damn them, eyes everywhere. You never knew who might be watching. The thought made him more than a little nervous.

'Ardee . . . aren't we taking a risk? I mean, what if your brother were to—'

She snorted. 'Forget about him. He won't do anything. I've told him to keep his nose out of my business.' Jezal had to smile. He imagined that must have been quite an amusing scene. 'Besides, I hear that you're all leaving for Angland on the next tide, and I could hardly let you go without saying goodbye, now could I?'

'I wouldn't have done that!' he said, horrified again. It hurt just hearing her say the word goodbye. 'I mean, well, I'd have let them sail without me before I would've done that!'

'Huh.'

They walked along in silence for a moment, skirting the lake, both with their eyes on the gravel. It was hardly the bitter-sweet farewell that he had pictured so far. Just bitter. They passed among the trunks of some willow trees, their branches trailing in the water below. It was a secluded spot, screened from prying eyes. Jezal reckoned he was unlikely to find one better for what he had to say. He glanced sideways at her, and took a deep breath.

'Ardee, er, I don't know how long we'll be away. I mean, I suppose it could be months . . .' He chewed at his top lip. It was not coming out at all as he had hoped. He had practised this speech twenty times at least, staring in his mirror until he got just the right expression: serious, confident, slightly wheedling. Now, though, the words came out in a foolish rush. 'I hope that, I mean, perhaps, I hope that you'll wait for me?'

'I daresay I'll still be here. I've nothing else to do. But don't worry, you'll have a lot to think about in Angland – war, honour, glory and all that. You'll soon forget about me.'

'No!' he shouted, catching hold of her arm. 'No I won't!' He pulled his hand away quickly, worried someone might see. At least she was looking at him now, somewhat surprised, maybe, at how fierce his denial had been – though not half as surprised as he was.

Jezal blinked down at her. A pretty girl certainly, but too dark, too tanned, too clever by half, simply dressed with no jewels, and with a great ugly bruise across her face. She would hardly have excited much comment in the officer's mess. How was it that she seemed to him the most beautiful woman in the world? The Princess Terez was an unwashed dog beside her. The clever words leaked out of his mind and he spoke without thinking, looking her straight in the eye. Maybe this was what honesty felt like.

'Look, Ardee, I know you think I'm an ass and, well, I daresay I am, but I don't plan always to be one. I don't know why you even look at me, and I don't know much about this sort of thing but, well . . . I think about you all

the time. I hardly think about anything else any more.' He took another deep breath. 'I think . . .' He glanced around again, just to check that no one was watching. 'I think I love you!'

She spluttered with laughter. 'You really are an ass,' she said. Despair. He was utterly crushed. He couldn't breathe for disappointment. His face screwed up, his head drooped and he stared down at the ground. There were tears in his eyes. Actual tears.

Pitiful. 'But I'll wait.' Joy. It swelled in his chest and burst out in a little girlish sob. He was helpless. It was ridiculous the power she had over him. The difference between misery and happiness was the right word from her. She laughed again. 'Look at you, you fool.'

She reached up and touched his face, rubbed a tear from his cheek with her thumb. 'I'll wait,' she said, and she smiled at him. That crooked smile.

The people had faded, the park, the city, the world. Jezal stared down at Ardee, for how long he could not have said, trying to stamp every detail of her face into his mind. He had a feeling, for some reason, that the memory of that smile might have to get him through a lot.

The docks were heaving with activity, even for the docks. The wharves boiled with people, the air shook and rattled with their din. Soldiers and supplies poured endlessly up the slippery gangways and onto the ships. Crates were hauled, barrels were rolled, hundreds of horses were dragged and pushed and kicked aboard, eyes bulging, mouths frothing. Men grunted and groaned, heaved at wet ropes, strained at wet beams, sweating and shouting in the spitting rain, slipping around on the slick decks, running here and there in epic confusion.

Everywhere people embraced, kissed, waved to each other. Wives saying goodbye to husbands, mothers to sons, children to fathers, all equally bedraggled. Some put a brave face on it, some wept and wailed. Others did not care: spectators come simply to witness the madness.

It all meant nothing to Jezal, leaning on the weathered rail of the ship that would carry him to Angland. He was sunk in a terrible gloom, nose running, hair plastered to his scalp with wet. Ardee was not there, and yet she was everywhere. He would hear her voice above the din, calling his name. He would glimpse her out of the corner of his eye, looking at him, and his breath would catch in his throat. He would smile, half-raise his hand to wave, then he would see it was not her. Some other dark-haired woman, smiling at some other soldier. His shoulders would slump again. Each time the disappointment was sharper.

He realised now that he had made a terrible mistake. Why the hell had he asked her to wait for him? Wait for what? He could not marry her, that was a fact. Impossible. But the thought of her even looking at another man made him feel sick. He was wretched.

Love. He hated to admit it, but it had to be. He had always regarded the whole notion with contempt. A stupid word. A word for bad poets to harp on, and foolish women to chatter about. A thing found in childish stories and with no relevance to the real world, where relationships between men and women were simple matters of fucking and money. Yet here he was, mired in a

horrible bog of fear and guilt, lust and confusion, loss and pain. Love. What a curse.

'I'd like to see Ardee,' murmured Kaspas, wistfully.

Jejal turned to stare at him. 'What? What did you say?'

'It's quite a sight to see,' said the Lieutenant, holding his hands up, 'that's all.' Everyone was a little careful around him since that card game, as if he might blow up at any moment.

Jejal turned sullenly back to the crowds. There was some kind of a commotion down below them. A single horseman was forcing his way through the chaos, spurring a well-lathered horse with frequent shouts of 'Move!' Even in the rain, the wings on the rider's helmet glittered. A Knight Herald.

'Bad news for someone,' murmured Kaspas.

Jejal nodded. 'Looks like us.' He was indeed making directly for their ship, leaving a trail of bemused and angry soldiers and workmen behind him. He swung out of the saddle and strode purposefully up the gangplank towards them, face grim, bright-polished armour covered with moisture and jingling with every step.

'Captain Luthar?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Jejal, 'I'll fetch the Colonel.'

'No need. My message is for you.'

'It is?'

'High Justice Marovia requires your presence at his offices. Immediately. It would be best if you took my mount.'

Jejal frowned. He did not like the taste of this at all. There was no reason that he could see for a Knight Herald to be bringing messages to him, except that he had been inside the House of the Maker. He wanted nothing more to do with that. He wanted it in the past, forgotten, along with Bayaz, and his Northman, and that disgusting cripple.

'The High Justice is waiting, Captain.'

'Yes, of course.' It seemed there was nothing to be done.

'Ah, Captain Luthar! An honour to see you again!' Jejal was hardly surprised to run into the madman Sulfur, even here outside the offices of the High Justice. He no longer even seemed a madman, just another part of a world gone entirely mad. 'An absolute honour!' he frothed.

'Likewise,' said Jejal numbly.

'I'm so lucky I caught you, what with both of us leaving so soon! My master has all manner of errands for me.' He gave a deep sigh. 'Never the slightest peace, eh?'

'No, I know what you mean.'

'Still, an honour indeed to see you, and victorious at the Contest! I saw the whole thing, you know, it was a privilege to bear witness.' He smiled broadly, different coloured eyes glittering. 'And to think, you were set on giving it up. Hah! But you stuck at it, just as I said you would! Yes you did, and now you reap the rewards! The edge of the World,' he whispered softly, as though to say the words out loud was to invite disaster. 'The edge of the World. Can you imagine? I envy you, indeed I do!'

Jejal blinked. 'What?'

'What! Hah! "What", he says! You are dauntless, sir! Dauntless!' And Sulfur

strode off across the wet Square of Marshals, chuckling to himself. Jezal was so bemused that he had not even the presence of mind to call him a damn idiot once he was out of earshot.

One of Marovia's many clerks ushered him through an empty, echoing hallway towards a pair of enormous doors. He stopped before them, knocked. At an answering cry he turned the handle and pulled one of the doors back, standing aside politely for Jezal to pass through.

'You may go in,' he said quietly, after they had been stood there for a while.

'Yes, yes, of course.'

The cavernous chamber beyond was eerily silent. Furniture was strangely sparse in that huge, panelled space, and what there was seemed oversized, as though for the use of people much bigger than Jezal. It gave him the distinct feeling that he was arriving at his own trial.

High Justice Marovia sat behind an enormous table, its surface polished to mirror brightness, smiling at Jezal with a kindly, if slightly pitying expression. Marshal Varuz was seated to his left, staring down guiltily at his own blurry reflection. Jezal had not thought he could feel more depressed, but on seeing the third member of the group he realised he had been wrong. Bayaz, wearing a self-satisfied smirk. He felt a mild surge of panic as the door shut behind him: the clicking of the latch felt like the clank of the heavy bolt on a prison cell.

Bayaz started up from his chair and came round the table. 'Captain Luthar, I am so glad you could join us.' The old man took Jezal's damp hand in both of his and squeezed it firmly, leading him forward into the room. 'Thank you for coming. Thank you indeed.'

'Er, of course.' As if he had been given a choice.

'Well now, you're probably wondering what this is all about. Allow me to explain.' He stepped back and perched on the edge of the table, like a kindly uncle holding forth to a child. 'I and a few brave companions – chosen people, you understand, people of quality – are engaging on a great journey! An epic voyage! A grand adventure! I have little doubt that, should we be successful, there will be stories told of this for years to come. Very many years.' Bayaz' forehead crinkled as he raised his white eyebrows. 'Well? What do you think?'

'Er . . .' Jezal glanced nervously over at Marovia and Varuz, but they were giving no clues as to what was going on. 'If I may?'

'Of course, Jezal – I may call you Jezal, may I?'

'Yes, er, well, yes, I suppose. Er, the thing is . . . I was wondering what all this has to do with me?'

Bayaz smiled. 'We are short a man.'

There was a long, heavy silence. A drop of water trickled down Jezal's scalp, dripped from his hair, ran down his nose and pattered against the tiles beneath his feet. Horror crept slowly through his body, from his gut to the very tips of his fingers. 'Me?' he croaked.

'The road will be a long and difficult one, most likely beset with dangers. We have enemies out there, you and I. More enemies than you would believe. Who could be more useful than a proven swordsman, such as yourself? The winner of the Contest, no less!'

Jezal swallowed. 'I appreciate the offer, really I do, but I am afraid I must

decline. My place is with the army, you understand.' He took a hesitant step back towards the door. 'I must go north. My ship will soon be sailing and—'

'I am afraid it has sailed already, Captain,' said Marovia, his warm voice stopping Jezal dead in his tracks. 'You need not concern yourself with that any longer. You will not be going to England.'

'But, your Worship, my company—'

'Will find another commander,' smiled the High Justice: understanding, sympathetic, but horribly firm. 'I appreciate your feelings, indeed I do, but we consider this more urgent. It is important that the Union be represented in this matter.'

'Terribly important,' murmured Varuz, half-heartedly. Jezal blinked at the three old men. There was no escape. So this was his reward for winning the Contest? Some crackpot voyage to who-knew-where in the company of a demented old man and a pack of savages? How he wished now that he had never started fencing! That he had never even seen a steel in his life! But wishing was useless. There was no way back.

'I need to serve my country—' mumbled Jezal.

Bayaz laughed. 'There are other ways to serve your country, my boy, than being one corpse in a pile, up there in the frozen North. We leave tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow? But my things are—'

'Don't worry, Captain,' and the old man slipped off the table and clapped him enthusiastically on the shoulder, 'everything is arranged. Your boxes were brought off the ship before it left. You have this evening to pick out some things for our journey, but we must travel light. Weapons, of course, and stout clothes for travelling. Make sure you pack a good pair of boots, eh? No uniforms, I'm afraid, they might attract the wrong kind of attention where we're going.'

'No, of course,' said Jezal miserably. 'Might I ask . . . where are we going?'

'The edge of the World, my boy, the edge of the World!' Bayaz' eyes twinkled. 'And back, of course . . . I hope.'

The Bloody-Nine

Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he's happy. They were leaving, at last. Beyond some vague talk about the Old Empire, and the edge of the World, he had no idea where they were going and he didn't care. Anywhere but this cursed place would do for him, and the sooner the better.

The latest member of the group didn't seem to share his good spirits. Luthar, the proud young man from the gate. The one who'd won the sword-game, thanks to Bayaz' cheating. He'd barely said two words together since he arrived. Just stood there, face rigid and chalky pale, staring out of the window, bolt upright like he had a spear all the way up his arse.

Logen ambled over to him. If you're going to travel with a man, and maybe fight alongside him, it's best to talk, and laugh if you can. That way you can get an understanding, and then a trust. Trust is what binds a band together, and out there in the wilds that can make the difference between living or dying. Building that kind of trust takes time, and effort. Logen reckoned it was best to get started early, and today he had good humour to spare, so he stood next to Luthar and looked out at the park, trying to dream up some common ground in which to plant the seeds of an unlikely friendship.

'Beautiful, your home.' He didn't think it was, but he was short on ideas.

Luthar turned from the window, looked Logen haughtily up and down. 'What would you know about it?'

'I reckon one man's thoughts are worth about as much as another's.'

'Huh,' sneered the young man coldly. 'Then I suppose that's where we differ.' He turned back to the view.

Logen took a deep breath. The trust might be a while coming. He abandoned Luthar and tried Quai instead, but the apprentice was scarcely more promising: slumped in a chair, frowning at nothing.

Logen sat down next to him. 'Aren't you looking forward to going home?'

'Home,' mumbled the apprentice listlessly.

'That's right, the Old Empire . . . or wherever.'

'You don't know what it's like there.'

'You could tell me,' said Logen, hoping to hear something about the peaceful valleys, cities, rivers and whatnot.

'Bloody. It's bloody there, and lawless, and life is cheap as dirt.'

Bloody and lawless. That all had an unpleasantly familiar smack to it. 'Isn't there an Emperor, or something?'

'There are many, always making war on one another, forging alliances that last a week, or a day, or an hour, before they scramble to be first to stab each other in the back. When one Emperor falls another rises, and another, and another, and meanwhile the hopeless and the dispossessed scavenge and loot and kill on the fringes. The cities dwindle, the great works of the past fall into ruin, the crops go unharvested and the people go hungry. Bloodshed and

betrayal, hundreds of years of it. The feuds have become so deep, so complicated, that few can tell any longer who hates who, and no one can say why. There's no need for reasons any more.'

Logen made one last effort. 'You never know. Things might have got better.'

'Why?' muttered the apprentice. 'Why?'

Logen was fumbling for a reply when one of the doors swung briskly open. Bayaz frowned around the room. 'Where's Maljinn?'

Quai swallowed. 'She left.'

'I can see she left! I thought I told you to keep her here!'

'You didn't tell me how,' muttered the apprentice.

His master ignored him. 'What the hell has become of that bloody woman? We must be away by noon! Three days I've known her, and she already has me at the end of my rope!' He clenched his teeth and took a deep breath. 'Find her, will you Logen? Find her and bring her back.'

'What if she doesn't want to come back?'

'I don't know, pick her up and carry her! You can kick her all the way back here as far as I'm concerned!'

Easy to say, but Logen didn't fancy trying it. Still, if it had to be done before they could leave, it was best done now. He sighed, got up from his chair and made for the door.

Logen pressed himself into the shadows by the wall, watching.

'Shit,' he whispered to himself. It would have to be now, just as they were about to leave. Ferro was twenty strides away, standing up tall with a deeper than usual scowl on her dark face. There were three men gathered round her. Masked men, all in black. Their sticks were down by their legs, behind their backs, kept half out of sight, but Logen had no doubt about what they had in mind. He could hear one of them talking, hissing through his mask, something about coming quietly. He winced. Coming quietly didn't sound like Ferro's style.

He wondered whether he should slip away and tell the others. He couldn't really say he liked the woman much, not near enough to get his head broken for her. But if he left them to it, three against one, the chances were they'd have knocked her to pieces by the time he got back, however tough she was, and dragged her off to who knew where. He might never get out of this damn city then.

He started judging the distance, thinking about how best to go at them, weighing his chances, but he'd been too long doing nothing, and his mind moved slowly. He was still working on it when Ferro suddenly jumped on one of them, yelling at the top of her voice, knocking him on his back. She gave him a couple of vicious-looking punches in the face before the others caught hold of her and dragged her up.

'Shit,' hissed Logen. The three of them wrestled, lurching around in the lane, knocking against the walls, grunting and swearing, kicking and punching, a tangle of flailing limbs. It seemed that time had run out for a clever approach. Logen gritted his teeth and charged towards them.

The one on the floor had rolled to his feet, shaking the fuzz out of his head while the other two struggled to get a good grip on Ferro. Now he lifted his stick high, arching back, ready to smash her on the skull. Logen let go a roar.

The masked face snapped round, surprised-looking.

‘Huh?’ Then Logen’s shoulder crunched into his ribs, lifting him off his feet and sending him sprawling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw someone swing a stick at him, but he’d got them offguard and there was no real force behind it. He caught it across his arm then pressed in under it and smashed the man right in the mask with his fists, a full-blooded punch with each hand. He reeled back, arms flopping, already falling. Logen grabbed him by two fistfuls of his black coat, hauled him into the air and flung him upsidedown into the wall.

He bounced off with a gurgle and crumpled on the cobbles. Logen spun round, fists clenched, but the last one was lying on his face with Ferro on top of him, one knee jammed into his back, pulling his head up by the hair and smashing his face into the road, shouting meaningless curses all the while.

‘What did you fucking do?’ he shouted, grabbing her under the elbow and dragging her off.

She tore free of his grip and stood there panting, fists bunched up by her sides, blood leaking out of her nose. ‘Nothing,’ she snarled.

Logen took a cautious step back. ‘Nothing? What’s this then?’

She bit off each word in her ugly accent and spat them at him. ‘I . . . don’t . . . know.’ She wiped her bloody mouth with one hand, then froze. Logen glanced over his shoulder. Three more masked men, running at them down the narrow lane.

‘Shit.’

‘Move, pink!’ Ferro turned and started running and Logen followed her. What else could he do? He ran. The horrible, breathless running of the hunted, shoulders prickling for a blow in the back, sucking in air in gasps, the slapping footfalls of the men behind echoing around him.

High white buildings flashed past on either side, windows, doors, statues, gardens. People too, shouting as they dived out of the way or flattening themselves against the walls. He had no idea where they were, no idea where they were going. A man stepped out of a doorway right in front of him, a big sheaf of papers in his arms. They crashed together, tumbled to the ground, rolling over and over in the gutter with papers flapping down all around them.

He tried to get up but his legs were burning. He couldn’t see! There was a piece of paper across his face. He tore it away, felt someone grab him under the arm and haul him along. ‘Up, pink!

Move!’ Ferro. She wasn’t even out of breath. Logen’s lungs were bursting as he struggled to keep up with her but she pulled steadily away, head down, feet flying.

She charged through an archway just ahead and Logen laboured after her, boots skidding as he turned the corner. A great shadowy space, timbers reaching up high above, like a strange forest of square beams. Where the hell were they? There was bright light just ahead, open air. He plunged out into it, blinking. Ferro was just beyond him, turning round slowly, breathing hard. They were in the middle of a circle of grass, a little circle.

He knew where they were now. The arena where he’d sat among the crowds, watching the sword-game. The empty benches stretched away all round. There were carpenters crawling amongst them, sawing and hammering.

They'd already taken some of the benches to pieces near the back and the supports stuck up high into the air alone like giant rib bones. He put his hands on his wobbly knees and bent over, gasping for air, blowing spit out onto the ground.

'What . . . now?'

'This way.' Logen straightened up with an effort and wobbled after her, but she was already on her way back. 'Not that way!'

Logen saw them. Black masked figures, again. The one at the front was a woman, tall with a shock of red hair sprouting off her head. She padded towards the circle silently on the balls of her feet, waved her arm behind her, pointing the other two out to the sides, trying to get on the flanks, surround him. Logen cast about, looking for a weapon, but there was nothing – just the empty benches and the high white walls beyond. Ferro was backing towards him, not ten feet away, and beyond her there were two more masks, creeping out around the enclosures with sticks in their hands. Five. Five altogether.

'Shit,' he said.

'What the hell is keeping them?' growled Bayaz, pacing the floor. Jezal had never seen the old man annoyed before, and for some reason it made him nervous. Whenever he came close, Jezal wanted to back away. 'I'm having a bath, damn it. Could be months before my next one. Months!' Bayaz stalked out of the room and slammed the bathroom door behind him, leaving Jezal alone with the apprentice.

They were probably close enough in age, but they had nothing else in common, so far as Jezal could see, and he stared with unconcealed contempt. A sickly, weaselly, puny, bookish sort. Sulking like that, moping around, it was pathetic. Rude, too. Damn rude. Jezal fumed silently. Just who did he think he was, the arrogant pup? What the hell did he have to be so upset about? It wasn't him who'd had his life stolen out from under him.

Still, if he had to be left alone with one of them, he supposed it could have been worse. It might have been the moron Northman with his fumbling, thick-tongued small-talk. Or that Gurmish witch, staring and staring with her devil-yellow eyes. He shuddered to think of it. People of quality, Bayaz had said. He would have laughed had he not been on the verge of tears.

Jezal cast himself down on the cushions in a high-backed chair, but he found scant comfort there. His friends were on their way to Angland now, and he missed them already. West, Kasper, Jalenhorm. Even that bastard Brint. On their way to honour, on their way to fame. The campaign would be long finished by the time he returned from whatever pit the old madman was leading him to, if he returned at all. Who knew when the next war would be, the next chance at glory?

How he wished he was going to fight the Northmen. How he wished he was with Ardee. It seemed like an age since he was happy. His life was awful. Awful. He lay back listlessly in his chair, wondering if things could possibly be any worse.

'Gurgh,' growled Logen as a stick cracked into his arm, then another into his shoulder, one in his side. He stumbled back, half on his knees, fending them away as best as he could. He could hear Ferro screaming somewhere behind

him, fury or pain he couldn't say, he was too busy taking a battering.

Something smacked across his skull, hard enough to send him reeling away towards the seats. He fell on his face and the front bench hit him in the chest, driving the air from his lungs. There was blood running down his scalp, on his hands, in his mouth. His eyes were watering from a blow to the nose, his knuckles were all skinned and bloody, near as ripped as his clothes were. He lay there, for a moment, gathering whatever strength was left. There was a thick length of timber lying on the ground behind the bench. He grabbed hold of the end of it. It was loose. He dragged it towards him. It felt good in his hand. Heavy.

He sucked in air, summoning one more effort. He moved his arms and legs a little, testing them. Nothing broken – except his nose maybe, but it was hardly the first time. He heard footsteps coming up behind. Slow footsteps, taking their time.

He pushed himself up, slowly, trying to look as though he was in a daze. Then he let go a roar and spun round, swinging the timber over his head. It broke in half across the masked man's shoulder with a mighty crack, half of it flying up off the turf and clattering away. The man gave a muffled wail and sank down, eyes screwed shut, one hand clutching at his neck, the other hanging useless, stick dropping from his fingers. Logen hefted the short piece of wood left in his hands and clubbed him across the face with it. It snapped his head back and drove him into the turf, mask half torn off, blood bubbling out from underneath.

Logen's head exploded with light and he tottered and sagged down on to his knees. Someone had hit him in the back of the head. Hit him hard. He swayed there for a moment trying to stop himself falling on his face, then things came suddenly back into focus. The red-haired woman was standing over him, raising her stick high.

Logen shoved himself up, flailed into her, fumbled with her arm, half pulling at her, half leaning on her, ears ringing, the world swinging madly. They staggered around, tugging on the stick like two drunkards wrestling over a bottle, back and forth in the circle of grass. He felt her punching him in the side with her other hand. Hard punches, right in the ribs.

'Aargh,' he growled, but his head was clearing now, and she was half his weight. He twisted the arm with the stick around behind her back. She punched him again, a knock on the side of his face that brought the stars back for an instant, but then he got hold of her other wrist and pinned that arm as well. He bent her backwards over his knee.

She kicked and twisted, eyes screwed up to furious slits, but Logen had her fast. He freed his right hand from the tangle of limbs, brought his fist up high and mashed it into her stomach. She gave a breathy wheeze and went limp, eyes bulging. He flung her away and she crawled a foot or two, pulled her mask down and started coughing puke onto the grass.

Logen stumbled and swayed, shook his head, spitting blood and dirt out onto the grass. Aside from the retching woman, there were four black, crumpled shapes stretched out in the circle. One of them was grunting softly as Ferro kicked him over and over. She had blood all over her face, but she was smiling.

'I am still alive,' Logen muttered to himself, 'I am still ...' There were more of them coming through the archway. He swung around, almost falling over. More, four more, from the other side. They were trapped.

'Move, pink!' Ferro dashed past him and sprang up onto the first bench, then the second, then the third, springing between them with great strides. Madness. Where was she going to go from there? Red Hair had stopped puking, she was crawling towards her fallen stick. The others were closing in fast, more of them than ever. Ferro was already a quarter of the way back and showing no signs of slowing, bounding from one bench to the next, making the planks rattle.

'Shit.' Logen set off after her. After a dozen benches his legs were burning again. He gave up trying to spring between them and started scrambling however he could. As he flopped over the backs of the benches he could see the masked men behind – following, watching, pointing and calling, spreading out through the seats.

He was slowing now. Each bench was a mountain. The nearest mask was only a few rows behind. He scrambled on, higher and higher, bloody hands clutching at the wood, bloody knees scraping across the benches, skull echoing with his own breath, skin prickling with sweat and fear. Air loomed suddenly empty before him. He stopped, gasping, arms waving, teetering on the edge of a dizzying drop.

He was close to the high roofs of the buildings behind, but most of the seating near the back had already been taken down, leaving the supports exposed – single looming pillars, narrow beams between them, and a lot of high, empty space. He watched Ferro spring from one soaring upright to another, then run across a wobbling plank, heedless of the plunging space below. She jumped off onto a flat roof at the far end, high above him. It seemed a very long way away.

'Shit.' Logen teetered out across the nearest beam, arms stretched out wide for balance, feet moving in an old man's shuffle. His heart was banging like a smith's hammer on an anvil, his knees were weak and wobbling from the climb. He tried to ignore the scrambling and shouting of the men behind him and look only at the knotted surface of the beam, but he couldn't look down without seeing the spider's web of timbers below him, and the tiny flagstones of the square below them. Far below.

He lurched onto a stretch of walkway still intact, clattered up it to the far end. He hauled himself up onto a timber above his head, locked his legs around it and dragged himself along on his arse whispering 'I am still alive,' to himself, over and over. The nearest mask had made it to the walkway, was running along it towards him.

The beam ended at the top of one of the upright struts. A square of wood a foot or two across. Then there was nothing. Two strides of empty air. Then another square at the top of another dizzying mast, then the plank to the flat roof. Ferro stared at him from the parapet.

'Jump!' she screamed. 'Jump, you pink bastard!'

He jumped. He felt the wind around him. His left foot landed on the square of wood, but there was no stopping. His right foot hit the plank. His ankle twisted, his knee buckled. The dizzy world pitched. His left foot came down,

half on the wood, half off. The plank rattled. He was in the empty air, limbs flailing. It seemed like a long time.

‘Ooof!’ The parapet crashed into his chest. His arms clawed with it but there was no breath left in him. He began to slide back, ever so slowly, inch by terrible inch. First he could see the roof, then he could see his hands, then he could see nothing but the stones in front of his face. ‘Help,’ he whispered, but no help came.

It was a long way down, he knew that. A long, long way, and there was no water to fall into this time. Only hard, flat, fatal stone. He heard a rattling. The mask coming across the plank behind him. He heard someone shouting, but none of it mattered much now. He slipped backwards a little further, hands scrabbling at the crumbling mortar. ‘Help,’ he croaked, but there was no one to help him. Only the masks and Ferro, and none of them seemed like the helping kind.

He heard a clunk and a despairing shriek. Ferro kicking the plank, and the mask falling. The scream fell away, it felt like for a long time, then it was cut off in a distant thud. The mask’s body smashing to pulp against the ground, far below, and Logen knew he was about to join him. You have to be realistic about these things. There would be no washing up on a river bank this time. His fingertips were slipping, slowly, the mortar was starting to come apart. The fighting, the running, the climb, they had all sucked the strength out of him, and now there was nothing left. He wondered what sound he would make as he plunged through the air. ‘Help,’ he mouthed.

And strong fingers closed around his wrist. Dark, dirty fingers. He heard growling, felt his arm being pulled, hard. He groaned. The edge of the parapet came back into view. He saw Ferro now, teeth gritted, eyes squeezed almost shut with effort, veins standing out from her neck, scar livid against her dark face. He clutched at the parapet with his other hand, his chest came up beyond it, he managed to force his knee over.

She hauled him the rest of the way, and he rolled and flopped on his back on the other side, gasping like a landed fish, staring up at the white sky. ‘I am still alive,’ he muttered to himself after a moment, hardly able to believe it. It wouldn’t have been too much of a surprise if Ferro had trodden on his hands and helped him fall.

Her face appeared above him, yellow eyes staring down, teeth bared in a snarl. ‘You stupid, heavy pink bastard!’

She turned away, shaking her head, stalked to a wall and started climbing, hauling herself up fast towards a low-pitched roof above. Logen winced as he watched her. Did she never get tired? His arms were battered, bruised, scratched all over. His legs ached, his nose had started bleeding again. Everything hurt. He turned and looked down. One mask was staring at him from the edge of the benches, twenty strides away. A few more were scurrying around below, looking for some way up. Far below, in the yellow circle of grass, he could see a thin black figure with red hair, pointing around, then up at him, giving orders.

Sooner or later they would find a way up. Ferro was perched on the peak of the roof above him, a ragged dark shape against the bright sky. ‘Stay there if you want,’ she barked, then turned and disappeared. Logen groaned as he

stood up, groaned as he shuffled to the wall, sighed as he began to search for a handhold.



‘Where is everyone?’ demanded Brother Longfoot. ‘Where is my illustrious employer? Where is Master Ninefingers? Where is the charming lady, Maljinn?’

Jezal looked around. The sickly apprentice was sunk too deep in self-centred gloom to answer. ‘I don’t know about the other two, but Bayaz is in the bath.’

‘I swear, I never came upon a man more attached to bathing than he. I hope the others will not be long. All is prepared, you know! The ship is ready. The stores are loaded. It is not my way to delay. Indeed it is not! We must catch the tide, or be stuck here until—’ The little man paused, staring up at Jezal with a sudden concern. ‘You seem upset, my young friend. Troubled, indeed. Can I, Brother Longfoot, be of any assistance?’

Jezal had half a mind to tell him to mind his own business, but he settled for an irritated, ‘No, no.’

‘I’d wager that there is a woman involved. Would I be right?’ Jezal looked up sharply, wondering how the man could have guessed. ‘Your wife, perhaps?’

‘No! I’m not married! It’s nothing like that. It’s er, well,’ he fumbled for the words to describe it, and failed. ‘It’s nothing like that is all!’

‘Ah,’ said the Navigator, with a knowing grin. ‘Ah, a forbidden love then, a secret love is it?’ Much to his annoyance, Jezal found that he was blushing. ‘I am right, I see it! There is no fruit so sweet as the one you cannot taste, eh, my young friend? Eh? Eh?’ He wagged his eyebrows in what Jezal felt was a most unsavoury fashion.

‘I wonder what’s keeping those two?’ Jezal didn’t care in the least, but anything to change the subject.

‘Maljinn, and Ninefingers? Hah,’ laughed Longfoot, leaning towards him. ‘Perhaps they’ve become involved, eh, in a secret love like yours? Perhaps they’ve crept off somewhere, to do what comes naturally!’ He nudged Jezal in the ribs. ‘Can you imagine, those two? That’d be something wouldn’t it? Hah!’

Jezal grimaced. The hideous Northman he already knew for an animal, and from what little he’d seen of that evil woman she might well be worse. All he could imagine coming naturally to them was violence. The idea was perfectly revolting. He felt soiled just thinking about it.



The roofs seemed to go on forever. Up one, down another. Creeping along the peaks, one slippery foot on either side, edging across ledges, stepping over crumbling bits of wall. Sometimes Logen would look up for a moment, get a dizzying view across the tumbling mass of damp slates, pitted tiles, ancient lead, to the distant wall of the Agriont, sometimes even the city far beyond. It might almost have been peaceful if it wasn’t for Ferro, fast-moving, sure-

footed, cursing at him and pulling him on, giving him no time to think about the view, or the nerve-wracking drops they skirted, or the black figures, surely still seeking for them below.

One of her sleeves had been torn half off some time in the fighting, flapping around her wrist, getting in the way as they climbed. She snarled and ripped it away at the shoulder. Logen smiled to himself as he recalled the efforts Bayaz had gone to in getting her to change her old stinking rags for new clothes. Now she was filthier than ever, shirt sweated through, spotted with blood and caked with grime from the roof-tops. She looked over her shoulder and saw him watching her. 'Move, pink,' she hissed at him.

'You see no colours, right?' She clambered on, ignoring him, swinging around a smoking chimney and slithering across the dirty slates on her belly, sliding down onto a narrow ledge between two roofs. Logen scrambled down behind her. 'No colours at all.'

'So?' she threw over her shoulder.

'So why do you call me pink?'

She looked round. 'Are you pink?'

Logen peered at his forearms. Aside from the mottled bruises, red scratches, blue veins, they were sort of pink, it had to be said. He frowned.

'Thought so.' She scurried away between the roofs, right to the end of the building, and peered down. Logen followed her, leaned out gingerly over the edge. A couple of people were moving around in the lane below. Far below, and there was no way down. They'd have to go back the way they came. Ferro had already moved away behind him.

Wind flicked at the side of Logen's face. Ferro's foot slapped against the edge of the roof, and then she was in the air. His jaw hung open as he watched her fly away, back arched, arms and legs flailing. She landed on a flat roof, grey lead streaked with green moss, rolled once then came up smoothly to her feet.

Logen licked his lips, pointed at his chest. She nodded. The flat roof was ten feet below, but there might have been twenty feet of empty air between him and it, and it was a long way down. He backed away slowly, giving himself a good run-up. He sucked in a couple of deep breaths, closed his eyes for a moment.

It would be perfect, in a way, if he fell. No songs, no stories. Just a bloody smear on a road somewhere. He started running. His feet thumped on the stone. The air whistled in his mouth, plucked at his torn clothes. The flat roof came flying up towards him. He landed with a shuddering impact, rolled once just as Ferro had done, stood up beside her. He was still alive.

'Hah!' he shouted. 'What d'you think of that?'

There was a creaking sound, then a cracking, then the roof gave way under Logen's feet. He grabbed despairingly at Ferro as he fell and she slid through after him, helpless. He tumbled in the air for a sickening moment, wailing, hands clutching at nothing. He crashed down on his back.

Logen coughed on choking dust, shook his head, shifted painfully. He was in a room, inky dark after the brightness outside. Dust was filtering down through the light from the ragged hole in the roof above. There was something soft under him. A bed. It had half collapsed, leaning at an angle, blankets

covered in broken plaster. There was something across his legs. Ferro. He snorted a gurgling laugh to himself. In bed with a woman again, at last. Unfortunately it wasn't quite what he'd been hoping for.

'Stupid fucking pink!' she snarled, scrabbling off him and over to the door, bits of wood and plaster sliding off her dusty back. She hauled on the doorknob. 'Locked! It's—' Logen crashed past her, ripping the door off its hinges and sprawling out into the corridor beyond.

Ferro sprang over him. 'Up, pink, up!' A handy-looking length of wood had split from the edge of the door, a couple of nails sticking out of the end. Logen snatched it up in his hand. He struggled to his feet, stumbled down the corridor a few paces, came to a junction. A shadowy hallway stretched away to either side. Small windows cast sharp pools of light on the dark matting.

No way to tell which way Ferro had gone. He turned right, towards a flight of stairs.

There was a figure moving carefully down the dim corridor towards him. Long and thin like a black spider in the darkness, balanced on the balls of its feet. A chink of light shone on bright red hair.

'You again,' said Logen, weighing the length of wood in his hand.

'That's right. Me.' There was a jingling sound, a flash of metal in the dark. Logen felt the piece of wood ripped out of his fingers and he saw it fly over the woman's shoulder and clatter away down the corridor. Unarmed again, but she didn't give him long to worry about it. There was something in her hand, something like a knife, and she threw it at him. He ducked out of the way and it hissed past his ear, then she jerked her other arm and something slashed him across the face, just under his eye. He lurched back against the wall, trying to understand what kind of magic he was facing.

It was like a metal cross, the thing in her hand, three curved blades, one with a hook on the end. A chain looped from a ring on the handle and disappeared up her sleeve.

The knife-thing darted out, missed Logen's face by an inch as he bobbed away, struck a shower of sparks as it ripped back along the wall and slapped smoothly back into her hand. She let it drop, swinging gently from its chain, rattling against the floor, jumping and dancing towards him as she edged forward. She jerked her wrist and the thing shot out at Logen again, slashed across his chest as he tried to get away, spattering drops of blood against the wall.

He dived at her but his outspread arms caught nothing. There was a rattle and he felt his foot dragged from under him, his ankle snapped round painfully, caught by the chain as she ducked by. He sprawled out on his face, started to push himself up. The chain snaked under his neck. He just got his hand behind it before it snapped taut. The woman was on top of him, he could feel her knee pressing into his back, could hear her breath hissing through her mask as she pulled, the chain growing tighter and tighter, cutting into the palm of his hand.

Logen grunted, scrabbling to his knees, lumbering unsteadily to his feet. The

woman was still on his back, all her weight bearing down on him, pulling at the chain as hard as she could. Logen flailed around with his free hand but he couldn't get at her, couldn't throw her off – she was like a barnacle stuck fast to him. He could hardly breathe now. He tottered forward a few steps, then dropped over backwards.

'Uurgh,' whispered the woman in his ear as his weight crushed her into the floor. The chain went slack enough for Logen to drag it clear and slither out from under it. Free. He rolled over and grabbed the woman's neck with his left hand, started squeezing. She kned at him, dug at him with her fists, but his weight was across her and the blows were weak. They snarled and gasped and croaked at each other, animal sounds, faces only inches apart. A couple of spots of blood dripped from the cut on his cheek and pattered on her mask. Her hand came up and started fumbling with his face, pushing his head back. Her finger forced its way up his nose.

'Aargh!' he screamed. Pain stabbed up into his head. He let go of her and staggered up, one hand clasped to his face. She scrambled away, coughing, landed a kick in his ribs that bent him over, but he still had a grip on the chain and he yanked on it with all his weight. Her arm snapped out and she yelped and flew straight into him, his knee sinking into her side, crushing the breath out of her. Logen grabbed hold of the back of her shirt, half lifted her off the floor and flung her down the stairs.

She rolled and flopped and bounced her way down, slid to a stop on her side near the bottom. Logen was half-tempted to follow her down and finish the job, but he had no time. There'd be more where she came from. He turned and hobbled back the other way, cursing his twisted ankle.

Sounds crept up on him from all around, echoing down the corridor from who knew where. Distant rattling and banging, shouts and cries. He stared into darkness, limping, running with sweat, one hand on the wall to steady himself. He leaned round a corner, trying to see if it was clear. He felt something cold across his neck. A knife.

'Still alive?' whispered a voice in his ear. 'You don't die easy, eh, pink?' Ferro. He slowly pushed her arm away.

'Where d'you get the knife?' He wished he had one.

'He gave it me.' There was a crumpled shape in the shadows by the wall, the matting all round soaked with dark blood. 'This way.'

Ferro crept off down the corridor, keeping low in the darkness. He could still hear the sounds, beneath them, beside them, all around them. They crept down a flight of stairs, out into a dim hallway panelled with dark wood. Ferro ducked from shadow to shadow, moving fast. Logen could do no more than limp after her, dragging his leg, trying not to squeal with pain whenever he put his weight on it.

'There! It's them!' Figures in the dim corridor behind. He turned to run, but Ferro held her arm out. There were more, coming the other way. There was a big door on his left, standing open a crack.

'In here!' Logen shoved his way through and Ferro darted in after him. There was a heavy piece of furniture beside it, a big cupboard thing with shelves on top, covered in plates. Logen grabbed hold of one end and dragged it across in front of the doors, a couple of the plates dropping off and smashing

on the floor. He pressed his back against it. That should hold them for a moment, at least.

A big room with a high vaulted ceiling. Two huge windows took up most of one wood-panelled wall, a big stone fireplace facing them. A long table stood between, ten chairs on either side, set for eating with cutlery and candlesticks. A big dining room, and there was only one way in. Or out.

Logen heard muffled shouting beyond the door. The big cupboard wobbled against his back. Another plate clattered from its shelf, bounced off his shoulder and smashed on the stone flags, scattering fragments across the floor.

'Nice fucking plan,' snarled Ferro. Logen's feet slid as he strained to hold the teetering cupboard up. She dashed over to the nearest window, fumbled at the metal frames round the little panes, prising with her fingernails, but there was no way out.

Logen's eye caught on something. An old greatsword, mounted over the fireplace as an ornament. A weapon. He gave the cupboard one last shove then hurried over to it, seized hold of the long hilt in both hands and ripped it from its bracket. It was blunt as a plough, the heavy blade spotted with rust, but still solid. A blow from it might not cut a man in half, but it would knock him down alright. He turned just in time to see the cupboard tipping over, dropping shattering crockery all over the stone floor.

Black figures spilled into the room, masked figures. The one at the front had an evil-looking axe, the next a short-bladed sword. The one behind him was dark-skinned, with gold rings through his ears. He had a long, curved dagger in either hand.

Those weapons were not for knocking a man on the head with, not unless they meant to knock his brains right out. Seemed that they'd given up on taking prisoners. Killing weapons, meant to kill. Well, so much the better, Logen told himself. If you say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, and one thing only, say he's a killer. He eyed those black-masked men, clambering over the fallen cupboard, spreading out cautiously around the far wall. He glanced over at Ferro, lips curled back, knife in her hand, yellow eyes sparkling. He fingered the grip of his stolen sword – heavy and brutal. Just the tool for the job, for once.

He plunged at the nearest mask, yelling at the top of his voice, swinging the sword over his head. The man tried to duck away but the tip of the blade caught him on the shoulder and knocked him reeling. Another one jumped in behind him, chopping with his axe, sending Logen stumbling away, gasping as his weight went onto his bad ankle.

He flailed around with the big sword, but there were too many. One scrambled over the table, got between him and Ferro. Something hit him in the back and he stumbled, spun, slipped, lashed out with the sword and hit something soft. Somebody screamed, but by then the one with the axe was coming for him again. Everything was a mess of masks and iron, clashing, scraping weapons, curses and cries, ragged breathing.

Logen swung the sword but he was so tired, so hurt, so aching. The sword was heavy, and getting heavier all the time. The mask weaved out of the way and the rusty blade clanged into the wall, knocking a great chunk out of the wooden panelling and biting into the plaster behind, the shock nearly jarring

it out of his hands.

‘Ooof,’ he breathed as the man kned him in the stomach. Something hit him in the leg and he nearly fell. He could hear somebody yelling behind, but it seemed far away. His chest was hurting, his mouth was sour. There was blood on him. All over him. He could hardly breathe. The mask stepped forward, and again, smiling, smelling victory. Logen lurched back towards the fireplace, his foot slipping, falling down on one knee.

All things come to an end.

He couldn’t lift the old sword any more. There was no strength left. Nothing. The room was growing blurry.

All things come to an end, but some only lie still, forgotten . . .

There was a cold feeling in Logen’s stomach, a feeling he hadn’t felt for a long time. ‘No,’ he whispered. ‘I’m free of you.’ But it was too late. Too late . . .

. . . there was blood on him, but that was good. There was always blood. But he was kneeling, and that was wrong. The Bloody-Nine kneels to no man. His fingers sought out the cracks between the stones of the fireplace, prising between them like old tree roots, pulling him up. His leg hurt and he smiled. Pain was the fuel that made the fires burn. Something moved in front of him. Masked men. Enemies.

Corpses, then.

‘You’re hurt, Northman!’ The eyes of the closest one sparkled above his mask, the shining blade of his axe danced in the air. ‘Want to give up yet?’

‘Hurt?’ The Bloody-Nine threw back his head and laughed. ‘I’ll fucking show you hurt!’ He tumbled forward, flowed beneath the axe, slippery as fishes in the river, swinging the heavy blade in a great low circle. It crunched into the man’s knee and cracked it back the wrong way, scythed on into his other leg and ripped it out from under him. He gave a muffled scream as he spun onto the stones, turning round and round in the air, shattered legs flopping.

Something dug into the Bloody-Nine’s back, but there was no pain. It was a sign. A message in a secret tongue, that only he could understand. It told him where the next dead man was standing. He reeled around and the sword followed him in a furious, beautiful, irresistible arc. It crunched into someone’s guts, folded him in half, snatched him off his feet and flung him through the air. He bounced from the wall beside the fireplace and crumpled on the floor in a shower of broken plaster.

A knife whirled, hissing, stuck deep into the Bloody-Nine’s shoulder with a damp thud. The black one, with the rings through his ears. He had thrown it. He was on the other side of the table, smiling, pleased with his throw. A terrible mistake. The Bloody-Nine came for him. Another knife flashed past, clattered against the wall. He sprang over the table and the sword followed behind.

The dark man dodged the first great swing, and the second. Fast and tricky clever, but not clever enough. The third blow bit him in the side. A glancing bite. Just a nibble. It only smashed his ribs and knocked him screaming to his knees. The last one was better, a circle of flesh and iron that carved into his mouth and ripped his head half off, showering blood across the walls. The Bloody-Nine plucked the knife from his shoulder and tossed it to the floor.

Blood ran from the wound, soaked through his shirt and made a great, lovely, warm red stain.

He dropped and faded away, leaves falling from the tree, rolling across the ground. A man lunged past, slashing at the air where he had stood with a short-bladed sword. Before he could turn, the Bloody-Nine was on him, left hand snaking round his fists. He struggled and strained, but it was useless. The Bloody-Nine's grip was strong as the roots of mountains, relentless as the tide. 'They send such as you to fight me?' He flung the man back against the wall and squeezed, crushing his hands around the grip of his weapon, turning the short blade until it was pointing at his chest. 'A fucking insult!' he roared, spitting him on his own sword.

The man screamed, and screamed behind his mask, and the Bloody-Nine laughed, and twisted the blade. Logen might have pitied him, but Logen was far away and the Bloody-Nine had no more pity in him than the winter. Less even. He stabbed, and cut, and cut, and smiled, and the screams bubbled and died, and he let the corpse drop to the cold stones. His fingers were slick with blood and he wiped it on his clothes, on his arms, on his face – just as it should be.

The one by the fireplace was sitting, hanging limp, head back, eyes like wet stones, staring at the ceiling. Part of the earth now. The Bloody-Nine smashed his face open with the sword just to make sure. Best to leave no doubts. The one who'd had the axe was crawling for the door, legs twisted out and dragging over the stones behind him, gasping and whimpering all the way.

'Quiet now.' The heavy blade crunched into the back of the man's skull and sprayed his blood across the stones.

'More,' he whispered, and the room turned around him as he sought out the next kill. 'More!' he bellowed, and he laughed, and the walls laughed, and the corpses laughed with him. 'Where's the rest of you?'

He saw a dark-skinned woman, with a bleeding cut on her face and a knife in her hand. She didn't look like the others, but she would do just as well. He smiled, crept forward, raising the sword in both hands. She stepped away, watching him, keeping the table between them, hard yellow eyes like the wolf. A tiny voice seemed to tell him that she was on his side. Shame.

'Northerner, eh?' asked a massive shape in the doorway.

'Aye, who's asking?'

'The Stone-Splitter.'

He was big this one, very big, and tough, and savage. You could see it on him as he shoved the cupboard away with his huge boot and crunched forward through the broken plates. It meant less than nothing to the Bloody-Nine though – he was made to break such men. Tul Duru Thunderhead had been bigger. Rudd Threetrees had been tougher. Black Dow had been twice as savage. The Bloody-Nine had broken them, and plenty more besides. The bigger, the tougher, the more savage he was, so much the worse would be his breaking.

'Stone-Shitter?' laughed the Bloody-Nine. 'So fuckin' what? Next to die is what y'are, and nothing more!' He held his left hand up, spattered with red blood, three fingers spread out wide, grinning through the gap where the middle one used to be, a long time ago. 'They call me the Bloody-Nine.'

'Dah!' The Stone-Splitter ripped off his mask and threw it on the floor. 'Liar! There's plenty o' men in the north have lost a finger. They ain't all Ninefingers!'

'No. Only me.'

That great face twisted up with rage. 'You fucking liar! You think to scare the Stone-Splitter with a name that's not your own? I'll carve a new arse in you, maggot! I'll put the bloody cross on you! I'll put you back in the mud you coward fucking liar!'

'Kill me?' The Bloody-Nine laughed louder than ever. 'I do the killing, fool!'

The talk was done. Stone-Splitter came at him with axe in one hand and mace in the other, great heavy weapons, though he used them quick enough. The mace swung across, smashed a great hole through the glass in one of the windows. The axe came down, split one timber of the table in half, made the plates jump in the air, the candlesticks topple. The Bloody-Nine twitched away, frog hopping, waiting for his time.

The mace missed his shoulder by an inch as he rolled across the table, cracked one of the big flat stones on the floor, split it down the middle, chips flying through the air. Stone-Splitter roared, swinging his weapons, smashing a chair in half, knocking a chunk of stone out of the fireplace, chopping a great gash in the wall. His axe stuck fast in the wood for a moment and the Bloody-Nine's sword flashed over, broke the haft into splintered halves, leaving the Stone-Splitter with a broken stick in his paw. He flung it away and hefted the mace, came on even harder, swinging it round with furious bellows.

It sailed over and the Bloody-Nine's sword caught it just below the head, ripped it out of the big hand. It twisted through the air and clattered into the corner, but the Stone-Splitter pressed forward, spreading his great hands out wide. Too close to use the big sword now. Stone-Splitter smiled as his huge arms closed around the Bloody-Nine, folding him tight, holding him fast. 'Got yer!' he shouted, squeezing him in a great hug.

An awful mistake. Better to embrace the burning fire.

Crack!

The Bloody-Nine's forehead smashed into his mouth. He felt the Stone-Splitter's grip slacken a little and he wriggled his shoulders, making room, wriggling, wriggling, mole in his burrow. He swung his head back as far as it would go. Billy-goat charges. The second head-butt smashed the Stone-Splitter's flat nose open. He grunted and the big arms released a little more. The third cracked his cheekbone. The arms fell away. The fourth broke his heavy jaw. Now it was the Bloody-Nine holding him up, smiling as he mashed his forehead into the shattered face. Woodpecker pecking, tap, tap, tap. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. There was a satisfying rhythm to the crunching of the face bones. Nine, and he let the Stone-Splitter fall. He sagged sideways and crumpled onto the floor, blood spilling from his ruined face.

'How's that for yer?' laughed the Bloody-Nine, wiping blood out of his eyes and giving the Stone-Splitter's lifeless body a couple of kicks. The room spun around him, swam around him, laughing, laughing. 'How's that . . . fuck . . . ' He stumbled, blinked, sleepy, campfire guttering. 'No . . . not yet . . . ' He dropped to his knees. Not yet. There was more to do, always more.

'Not yet,' he snarled, but his time was up . . .

. . . Logen screamed. He fell down. Pain, everywhere. His legs, his shoulder, his head. He wailed until the blood caught in his throat, then he coughed and gasped and rolled around, scrabbling at the floor. The world was a blurry smear. He gurgled up blood and drooled it out, long enough to start wailing again.

A hand clamped over his mouth. 'Stop your damn crying, pink! Now, you hear me?' A voice, whispering urgent in his ear. Strange, hard voice. 'Stop your crying or I leave you, understand? One chance!' The hand came away. Air came out between his gritted teeth in a high pitched, keening moan, but not too loud.

A hand clamped round his wrist, dragged his arm up. He gasped as his shoulder stretched out, was dragged over something hard. Torture. 'Up, bastard, I can't carry you! Up, now! One chance, understand?'

He was lifted slowly, he tried to push with his legs. The breath whistled and clicked in his throat, but he could do it. Left foot, right foot. Easy. His knee buckled, pain stabbed up his leg. He screamed again and fell, grovelled on the floor. Best to lie still. His eyes closed.

Something slapped him hard in the face, and again. He grunted. Something slid under his armpit, started to pull him up.

'Up, pink! Up, or I leave you. One chance, you hear?'

Breath in, breath out. Left foot, right foot.

Longfoot fussed and worried, first tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair, then counting on them, shaking his head and moaning about tides. Jezal stayed silent, hoping against hope that the two savages might have drowned in the moat, and that the whole venture might therefore come to nothing. There would still be plenty of time to make it to Angland. Perhaps all was not lost . . .

He heard the door open behind him, and his dreams were punctured. Misery swaddled him once again, but it was soon replaced by horrified surprise as he turned around.

Two ragged shapes stood in the doorway, covered in blood and filth. Devils, surely, stepped out from some gate to hell. The Gurkish woman was cursing as she lurched into the room. Ninefingers had one arm across her shoulders, the other swinging loose, blood dripping from his fingertips, head drooping.

They wobbled together for a step or two, then the Northman's stumbling foot caught on a chair leg and they tumbled onto the floor. The woman snarled and shrugged off his limp arm, shoved him away and scrambled up to her feet. Ninefingers rolled over slowly, groaning, and a deep gash in his shoulder yawned open, oozing blood across the carpet. It was red in there, like fresh meat in a butcher's shop. Jezal swallowed, horrified and fascinated at once.

'God's breath!'

'They came for us.'

'What?'

'Who came?'

A woman sidled cautiously around the door frame, red-haired, all in black, wearing a mask. A Practical, Jezal's numb brain was saying, but he could not understand why she was so bruised, or walking with such a limp. Another

edged through behind her, a man, armed with a heavy sword.

'You're coming with us,' said the woman.

'Make me!' Maljinn spat at her. Jezal was shocked to see she had produced a knife from somewhere, and a bloody one at that. She should not be armed! Not here!

He realised, stupidly, that he was wearing a sword. Of course he was. He fumbled with the hilt and drew it, with the vague intention of knocking the Gurmish devil on the back of the head with the flat before she could do any more damage. If the Inquisition wanted her they could damn well have her, and the rest of them too. Unfortunately, the Practicals got the wrong idea.

'Drop it,' hissed the red-haired woman, glaring at him through narrow eyes.

'I will not!' said Jezal, tremendously offended that she might think he was on the side of these villains.

'Erm . . .' said Quai.

'Aaargh,' groaned Ninefingers, clutching up a bloody handful of carpet and dragging it towards him, making the table lurch across the floor.

A third Practical crept through the door, around the red-haired woman, a heavy mace in his gloved fist. An unpleasant-looking weapon. Jezal could not help picturing the effect it might have on his skull, if swung in anger. He fingered the hilt of his sword uncertainly, feeling in terrible need of someone to tell him what to do.

'Coming with us,' said the woman again, as her two friends advanced slowly into the room.

'Oh dear,' murmured Longfoot, taking cover behind the table.

Then the door to the bathroom banged against the wall. Bayaz stood there, entirely naked, dripping with soapy water. His slow gaze took in first Ferro, scowling with her knife out, then Longfoot hiding behind the table, Jezal with sword drawn, Quai standing with his mouth open, Ninefingers sprawled out in a bloody ruin, and finally the three black masked figures, weapons at the ready.

There was a pregnant pause.

'What the fuck is this?' he roared, striding into the centre of the room, water dripping from his beard, down through the grizzled white hairs on his chest, off his slapping fruits. It was a strange sight to see. A naked old man confronting three armed Practicals of the Inquisition. Ridiculous, and yet no one was laughing. There was something strangely terrifying about him, even without his clothes and running with wet. It was the Practicals who shifted backwards, confused, scared even.

'You're coming with us,' the woman repeated, though a certain doubt seemed to have entered her voice. One of her companions stepped warily toward Bayaz.

Jezal felt a strange sensation in his stomach. A tugging, a sucking, an empty, sick feeling. It was like being back on the bridge, in the shadow of the Maker's House. Only worse. The wizard's face had turned terribly hard. 'My patience is at an end.'

Like a bottle dropped from a great height, the nearest Practical burst apart. There was no thunderclap, only a gentle squelching. One moment he was moving toward the old man, sword raised, entirely whole. The next he was a

thousand fragments. Some unknown part of him thudded wetly against the plaster next to Jezal's head. His sword dropped and rattled on the boards.

'You were saying?' growled the First of the Magi.

Jezal's knees trembled. His mouth gaped. He felt faint, and queasy, and awfully hollow inside. There were spots of blood across his face, but he dared not move to wipe them off. He stared at the naked old man, unable to believe his eyes. It seemed that he had watched a well-meaning old buffoon change in an instant into a brutal murderer, and without the slightest grain of hesitation.

The red-haired woman stood there a moment, splattered with blood and flecks of meat and bone, eyes wide as two dinner plates, then started to shuffle slowly backwards towards the door. The other one followed her, almost tripping over Ninefingers' foot in his haste to get away. Everyone else stayed motionless as statues. Jezal heard quick footsteps in the corridor outside as the two Practicals ran for their lives. He almost envied them. They, it seemed, would escape. He was trapped in this nightmare.

'We must leave, now!' barked Bayaz, wincing as if he was in pain, 'just as soon as I have my trousers on. Help him, Longfoot!' he shouted over his shoulder. For once, the Navigator was lost for words. He blinked, then got up from behind the table and bent down over the unconscious Northman, ripped off a strip of his tattered shirt to use as a bandage. He paused, frowning, as though unsure where to begin.

Jezal swallowed. His sword was still in his hand, but he seemed to lack the strength to put it away. Bits of the unfortunate Practical were scattered around the room, stuck to the walls, the ceiling, the people. Jezal had never seen a man die before, let alone in so hideous and unnatural a fashion. He supposed he should have been horrified, but instead he felt only an overpowering sense of relief. His worries seemed now rather petty things.

He, at least, was still alive.

The Tools we Have

Glokta stood in the narrow hallway, leaning on his cane and waiting. On the other side of the door, he could hear raised voices.

'I said, no visitors!'

He sighed to himself. He had many better things to do than to stand around here on his aching leg, but he had given his word and he meant to keep it. A pokey, unremarkable hallway in a pokey, unremarkable house among many hundreds of others the same. The whole district was recently built, terraces of houses in the new fashion: half-timbered, three stories, good perhaps for a family and a couple of servants. Hundreds of houses, one very much like another. Houses for the gentlerfolk. The new rich. Jumped-up commoners, Sult would probably have called them. Bankers, merchants, artisans, shop keepers, clerks. *Perhaps the odd town-house of some successful gentleman farmer, like this one here.*

The voices had stopped now. Glokta heard movement, some clinking of glass, then the door opened a crack and the maid peered out. An ill-favoured girl with big, watery eyes. She looked scared and guilty. *Still, I am used to that. Everyone seems scared and guilty around the Inquisition.*

'She'll see you now,' the girl mumbled. Glokta nodded and shuffled past her into the room beyond.

He had some hazy memories of staying with West's family for a week or two one summer, up in England, a dozen years ago perhaps, although it seemed more like a hundred. He remembered fencing with West in the courtyard of their house, of being watched every day by a dark-haired girl with a serious face. He remembered meeting a young woman in the park not long ago, who had asked him how he was. He had been in a lot of pain at the time, scarcely seeing straight, and her face was a blur in his memory. So it was that Glokta was not sure what to expect, but he certainly had not expected the bruises. He was a touch shocked, for a moment. *Though I hide it well.*

Dark, purple and brown and yellow, under her left eye, the lower lid well swollen. Round the corner of her mouth too, the lip split and scabbed over. Glokta knew a lot about bruises, few men more. *And I hardly think she got these by accident. She was punched in the face, by someone who meant it.* He looked at those ugly marks, and he thought about his old friend Collem West, crying in his dining room and begging for help, and he put the two together.

Interesting.

She sat there, all the while, looking back at him with her chin high, the side of her face with the worst bruises turned towards him, as though challenging him to say something. *She is not much like to her brother. Not much like at all. I don't think she'll be bursting into tears in my dining room, or anywhere else.*

'What can I do for you, Inquisitor?' she asked him coldly. He detected the very slightest slurring of the word Inquisitor. *She has been drinking . . . though*

she hides it well. Not enough to make her stupid. Glokta pursed his lips. For some reason he had the feeling that he needed to watch his step.

‘I’m not here in a professional capacity. Your brother asked me to—’

She cut him off rudely. ‘Did he? Really? Here to make sure I don’t fuck the wrong man, are you?’ Glokta waited for a moment, allowing that to sink in, then he began to chuckle softly to himself. *Oh, that’s grand! I begin to quite like her!* ‘Something funny?’ she snapped.

‘Pardon me,’ said Glokta, wiping his running eye with a finger, ‘but I spent two years in the Emperor’s prisons. I daresay, if I had known I’d be there half that long at the start, I would have made a more concerted effort to kill myself. Seven hundred days, give or take, in the darkness. As close to hell, I would have thought, as a living man can go. My point is this – if you mean to upset me you’ll need more than harsh language.’

Glokta treated her to his most revolting, toothless, crazy smile. There were few people indeed who could stomach that for long, but she did not look away for an instant. Soon, in fact, she was smiling back at him. A lop-sided grin of her own, and one which he found oddly disarming. *A different tack, perhaps.*

‘The fact is, your brother asked me to look after your welfare while he is away. As far as I’m concerned you can fuck whomever you please, though my general observation has been that, as far as the reputations of young women are concerned, the less fucking the better. The reverse is true for young men of course. Hardly fair, but then life is unfair in so many ways, this one hardly seems worth commenting on.’

‘Huh. You’re right there.’

‘Good,’ said Glokta, ‘so we understand each other then. I see that you hurt your face.’

She shrugged. ‘I fell. I’m a clumsy fool.’

‘I know how you feel. I’m such a fool I knocked half my teeth out and hacked my leg to useless pulp. Look at me now, a cripple. It’s amazing where a little foolishness can take you, if it goes unchecked. We clumsy types should stick together, don’t you think?’

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, stroking the bruises on her jaw. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I suppose we should.’

Goyle’s Practical, Vitari, was sprawled on a chair opposite Glokta, just outside the huge dark doors to the Arch Lector’s office. She was slumped into it, poured onto it, draped over it like a wet cloth, long limbs dangling, head resting on the back. Her eyes twitched lazily around the room from time to time under heavy lids, sometimes coming to rest on Glokta himself for insultingly long periods. She never turned her head though, or indeed moved a muscle, as though the effort might be too painful.

Which, indeed, it probably would be.

Plainly, she had been involved in a most violent melee, hand to hand. Above her black collar, her neck was a mass of mottled bruises. There were more around her black mask, a lot more, and a long cut across her forehead. One of her drooping hands was heavily bandaged, the knuckles of the other were scratched and scabbed over. *She’s taken more than a couple of knocks. Fighting hard, against someone who meant business.*

The tiny bell jumped and tinkled. ‘Inquisitor Glokta,’ said the secretary, as

he hurried out from behind his desk to open the door, 'his Eminence will see you now.'

Glokta sighed, grunted and heaved on his cane as he got to his feet. 'Good luck,' said the woman as he limped past.

'What?'

She gave a barely perceptible nod towards the Arch Lector's office. 'He's in a hell of a mood today.'

As the door opened, Sult's voice washed out into the ante-room, changing from a muffled murmuring into an all-out scream. The secretary jerked back from the gap as if slapped in the face.

'Twenty Practicals!' shrieked the Arch Lector, from beyond the archway. 'Twenty! We should have been questioning that bitch now, instead of sitting here, licking our wounds! How many Practicals?'

'Twenty, Arch Lec—'

'Twenty! Damn it!' Glokta took a deep breath and insinuated himself through the door. 'And how many dead?' The Arch Lector was striding briskly up and down the tiled floor of his huge circular office, waving his long arms in the air. He was dressed all in white, as spotless as ever. *Though I fancy a hair is out of place, maybe even two. He must truly be in a fury.* 'How many?'

'Seven,' mumbled Superior Goyle, hunched into his chair.

'A third of them! A third! How many injured?'

'Eight.'

'Most of the rest! Against how many?'

'In all, there were six—'

'Really?' The Arch Lector thumped his fists on the table, leaning down over the shrinking Superior. 'I heard two. Two!' he screamed, pacing once more round and round the table, 'and both of them savages! Two I heard! A white one and a black one, and the black one a woman! A woman!' He kicked savagely at the chair next to Goyle and it wobbled back and forth on its feet. 'And what's worse, there were countless witnesses to this disgrace! Did I not say discreet? What part of the word discreet is beyond your comprehension, Goyle?'

'But Arch Lector, circumstances cannot—'

'Cannot?' Sult's screech rose an entire octave higher. 'Cannot? How dare you give me *cannot*, Goyle? Discreet I asked for, and you gave me bloody slaughter across half the Agriont, and failed into the bargain! We look like fools! Far worse, we look like weak fools! My enemies on the Closed Council will waste no time in turning this farce to their advantage. Marovia's already stirring trouble, the old windbag, whining about liberty and tighter reins and all the rest of it! Damn lawyers! They had their way, we'd get nothing done! And you're making it happen, Goyle! I'm stalling, and I'm saying sorry, and I'm trying to put things in the best light, but a turd's a turd, whatever light it's in! Do you have any notion of the damage you've inflicted? Of the months of hard work you've undone?'

'But, Arch Lector, have they not now left the—'

'They'll be back, you cretin! He did not go to all this trouble simply to leave, dolt! Yes they've gone, idiot, and they've taken the answers with them! Who they are, what they want, who is behind them! Left? Left? Damn you, Goyle!'

'I am wretched, your Eminence.'

'You are less than wretched!'

'I cannot but apologise.'

'You're lucky you're not apologising over a slow fire!' Sult sneered his disgust. 'Now get out of my sight!'

Goyle flashed a look of the most profound hatred at Glokta as he cringed his way out of the room. *Goodbye, Superior Goyle, goodbye. The Arch Lector's fury could not fall upon a more deserving candidate.* Glokta could not suppress the tiniest of smiles as he watched him go.

'Something amusing you?' Sult's voice was ice as he held out his white gloved hand, purple stone flashing on his finger.

Glokta bent to kiss it. 'Of course not, your Eminence.'

'Good, because you've nothing to be amused about, I can tell you! Keys?' he sneered. 'Stories? Scrolls? What could have possessed me to listen to your drivel?'

'I know, Arch Lector, I apologise.' Glokta edged humbly into the chair that Goyle had so recently vacated.

'You apologise, do you? Everyone apologises! Some good that does me! Fewer apologies and more successes is what I need! And to think, I had such high hopes for you! Still, I suppose we must work with the tools we have.'

Meaning? But Glokta said nothing.

'We have problems. Very serious problems, in the South.'

'The South, Arch Lector?'

'Dagoska. The situation there is grave. Gurkish troops are flocking to the peninsula. They already outnumber our garrison by ten to one, and all our strength is committed in the North. Three regiments of the King's Own remain in Adua, but with the peasants getting out of hand across half of Middelrand, they cannot be spared. Superior Davoust was keeping me informed in weekly letters. He was my eyes, Glokta, do you understand? He suspected that there was a conspiracy afoot within the city. A conspiracy intending to deliver Dagoska into the hands of the Gurkish. Three weeks ago the letters stopped, and yesterday I learned that Davoust has disappeared. Disappeared! A Superior of the Inquisition! Vanished into thin air! I am blind, Glokta. I am fumbling in the dark at a most crucial time! I need someone there that I can trust, do you understand?'

Glokta's heart was thumping. 'Me?'

'Oh you're learning,' sneered Sult. 'You are the new Superior of Dagoska.'

'Me?'

'Many congratulations, but forgive me if we leave the feast until a quieter moment! You, Glokta, you!' The Arch Lector leaned down over him. 'Go to Dagoska and dig. Find out what happened to Davoust. Weed the garden down there. Root out everything disloyal. Everything and anyone. Light a fire under them! I need to know what's going on, if you have to toast the Lord Governor until he drips gravy!'

Glokta swallowed. 'Toast the Lord Governor?'

'Is there an echo in here?' snarled Sult, looming even lower. 'Sniff out the rot, and cut it away! Hack it off! Burn it out! All of it, wherever it is! Take charge of the city's defences yourself if you must. You were a soldier!' He

reached out and slid a single sheet of parchment across the table top. 'This is the King's writ, signed by all twelve chairs on the Closed Council. All twelve. I sweated blood to get it. Within the city of Dagoska, you will have full powers.'

Glokta stared down at the document. A simple sheet of cream-coloured paper, black writing, a huge red seal at the bottom. *We, the undersigned, confer upon His Majesty's faithful servant, Superior Sand dan Glokta, our full powers and authority . . .* Several blocks of neat writing, and below, two columns of names. Crabby blotches, flowing swirls, near illegible scrawls. *Hoff, Sult, Marovia, Varuz, Halleck, Burr, Torlichorm, and all the rest. Powerful names.* Glokta felt faint as he picked up the document in his two trembling hands. It seemed heavy.

'Don't let it go to your head! You still have to tread carefully. We can stand no more embarrassments, but the Gurmish must be kept out at all costs, at least until this business in Angland is settled. At all costs, do you understand?'

I understand. A posting to a city surrounded by enemies and riddled with traitors, where one Superior has already mysteriously disappeared. Closer to a knife in the back than a promotion, but we must work with the tools we have. 'I understand, Arch Lector.'

'Good. Keep me well informed. I want to be swamped by your letters.'

'Of course.'

'You have two Practicals, correct?'

'Yes, your Eminence, Frost and Severard, both very—'

'Not nearly enough! You won't be able to trust anyone down there, not even the Inquisition.' Sult seemed to think about that for a moment. 'Especially the Inquisition. I have picked out a half dozen others whose skills are proven, including Practical Vitari.'

That woman, watching over my shoulder? 'But, Arch Lector—'

'Don't "but" me, Glokta!' hissed Sult. 'Don't you dare "but" me, not today! You're not half as crippled as you could be! Not half as crippled, you understand?'

Glokta bowed his head. 'I apologise.'

'You're thinking, aren't you? I can see the cogs turning. Thinking you don't want one of Goyle's people getting in the way? Well, before she worked for him she worked for me. A Styrian, from Sipano. Cold as the snow, those people, and she's the coldest of them, I can tell you. So you needn't worry. Not about Goyle, anyway.' *No. Only about you, which is far worse.*

'I will be honoured to have her along.' *I will be damned careful.*

'Be as honoured as you damn well please, just don't let me down! Make a mess of this and you'll need more than that piece of paper to save you. A ship is waiting at the docks. Leave. Now.'

'Of course, your Eminence.'

Sult turned away and strode over to the window. Glokta quietly got up, quietly slid his chair under the table, quietly shuffled across the room. The Arch Lector was still standing, hands clasped behind him, as Glokta ever so carefully pulled the doors to. It was not until they clicked shut that he realised he had been holding his breath.

'How'd it go?'

Glokta turned round sharply, his neck giving a painful click.

Strange, how I never learn not to do that. Practical Vitari was still flopped in her chair, looking up at him with tired eyes. She did not seem to have moved the whole time he was inside. *How did it go?* He ran his tongue around his mouth, over his empty gums, thinking about it. *That remains to be seen.* ‘Interesting,’ he said in the end. ‘I am going to Dagoska.’

‘So I hear.’ The woman did indeed have an accent, now he thought about it. *A slight whiff of the Free Cities.*

‘I understand you’re coming with me.’

‘I understand I am.’ But she did not move.

‘We are in something of a hurry.’

‘I know.’ She held out her hand. ‘Could you help me up?’

Glokta raised his eyebrows. *I wonder when I was last asked that question?* He had half a mind to say no, but in the end he held his hand out, if only for the novelty. Her fingers closed round it, started to pull. Her eyes were narrowed, he could hear her breath hissing as she unfolded herself slowly from the chair. It hurt, having her pull on him like that, in his arm, in his back. *But it hurts her more.* Behind her mask, he was pretty sure, her teeth were gritted with pain. She moved her limbs one at a time, cautiously, not sure what would hurt and how much. Glokta had to smile. *A routine I go through myself every morning. Strangely invigorating, to see someone else doing it.*

Eventually she was standing, her bandaged hand clutched against her ribs. ‘You able to walk?’ asked Glokta.

‘I’ll loosen up.’

‘What happened? Dogs?’

She gave a bark of laughter. ‘No. A big Northman knocked the shit out of me.’

Glokta snorted. *Well, forthright at least.* ‘Shall we go?’

She looked down at his cane. ‘Don’t suppose you’ve got one of those spare, have you?’

‘I’m afraid not. I only have the one, and I can’t walk without it.’

‘I know how you feel.’

Not quite. Glokta turned and began to limp away from the Arch Lector’s office. *Not quite.* He could hear the woman hobbling along behind. *Strangely invigorating, to have someone trying to keep up with me.* He upped the pace, and it hurt him. *But it hurts her more.*

Back to the South, then. He licked at his empty gums. *Hardly a place of happy memories. To fight the Gurkish, after what it cost me last time. To root out disloyalty in a city where no one can be trusted, especially those sent to help me. To struggle in the heat and the dust, at a thankless task almost certain to end in failure. And failure, more than likely, will mean death.*

He felt his cheek twitch, his eyelid flicker. *At the hands of the Gurkish? At the hands of plotters against the crown? At the hands of his Eminence, or his agents? Or simply to vanish, as my predecessor did? Has one man ever had such a range of deaths to choose from?* The corner of his mouth twitched up. *I can hardly wait to get started.*

That same question came into his head, over and over, and he still had no answer.

Why do I do this?

Why?

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sore from reading it

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before he got to the end



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PART I

‘We should forgive our enemies, but not before they are hanged.’

Heinrich Heine

The Great Leveller

Damn mist. It gets in your eyes, so you can't see no more than a few strides ahead. It gets in your ears, so you can't hear nothing, and when you do you can't tell where it's coming from. It gets up your nose, so you can't smell naught but wet and damp. Damn mist. It's a curse on a scout.

They'd crossed the Whiteflow a few days before, out of the North and into Angland, and the Dogman had been nervy all the way. Scouting out strange land, in the midst of a war that weren't really their business. All the lads were jumpy. Aside from Threetrees, none of 'em had ever been out of the North. Except for Grim maybe. He weren't saying where he'd been.

They'd passed a few farms burned out, a village all empty of people. Union buildings, big and square. They'd seen the tracks of horses and men. Lots of tracks, but never the men themselves. Dogman knew Bethod weren't far away, though, his army spread out across the land, looking for towns to burn, food to steal, people to kill. All manner o' mischief. He'd have scouts everywhere. If he caught Dogman or any of the rest, they'd be back to the mud, and not quickly. Bloody cross and heads on spikes and all the rest of it, Dogman didn't wonder.

If the Union caught 'em they'd be dead too, most likely. It was a war, after all, and folk don't think too clearly in a war. Dogman could hardly expect 'em to waste time telling a friendly Northman from an unfriendly one. Life was fraught with dangers, alright. It was enough to make anyone nervy, and he was a nervy sort at the best of times.

So it was easy to see how the mist might have been salt in the cut, so to speak.

All this creeping around in the murk had got him thirsty, so he picked his way through the greasy brush, over to where he could hear the river chattering. He knelt down at the water's edge. Slimy down there, with rot and dead leaves, but Dogman didn't reckon a little slime would make the difference, he was about as dirty as a man could be already. He scooped up water in his hands and drank. There was a breath of wind down there, out beyond the trees, pushing the mist in close one minute, dragging it out the next. That's when the Dogman saw him.

He was lying on his front, legs in the river, top half up on the bank. They stared at each other a while, both fully shocked and amazed. He'd got a long stick coming out of his back. A broken spear. That's when the Dogman realised he was dead.

He spat the water out and crept over, checking careful all around to make sure no one was waiting to give him a blade in the back. The corpse was a man of about two dozen years. Yellow hair, brown blood on his grey lips. He'd got a padded jacket on, bloated up with wet, the kind a man might wear under a coat of mail. A fighting man, then. A straggler maybe, lost his crew

and been picked off. A Union man, no doubt, but he didn't look so different to Dogman or to anyone else, now he was dead. One corpse looks much like another.

'The Great Leveller,' Dogman whispered to himself, since he was in a thoughtful frame of mind. That's what the hillmen call him. Death, that is. He levels all differences. Named Men and nobodies, south or north. He catches everyone in the end, and he treats each man the same.

Seemed like this one had been dead no more 'n a couple of days. That meant whoever killed him might still be close, and that got the Dogman worried. The mist seemed full of sounds now. Might've been a hundred Carls, waiting just out of sight. Might've been no more than the river slapping at its banks. Dogman left the corpse lying and slunk off into the trees, ducking from one trunk to another as they loomed up out of the grey.

He nearly stumbled on another body, half buried in a heap of leaves, lying on his back with his arms spread out. He passed one on his knees, a couple of arrows in his side, face in the dirt, arse in the air. There's no dignity in death, and that's a fact. The Dogman was starting to hurry along, too keen to get back to the others, tell them what he'd seen. Too keen to get away from them corpses.

He'd seen plenty, of course, more than his share, but he'd never quite got comfortable around 'em. It's an easy thing to make a man a carcass. He knew a thousand ways to do it. But once you've done it, there's no going back. One minute he's a man, all full up with hopes, and thoughts, and dreams. A man with friends, and family, and a place where he's from. Next minute he's mud. Made the Dogman think on all the scrapes he'd been in, all the battles and the fights he'd been a part of. Made him think he was lucky still to be breathing. Stupid lucky. Made him think his luck might not last.

He was halfway running now. Careless. Blundering about in the mist like an untried boy. Not taking his time, not sniffing the air, not listening out. A Named Man like him, a scout who'd been all over the North, should've known better, but you can't stay sharp all the time. He never saw it coming.

Something knocked him in the side, hard, ditched him right on his face. He scrambled up but someone kicked him down. Dogman fought, but whoever this bastard was he was fearsome strong. Before he knew it he was down on his back in the dirt, and he'd only himself to blame. Himself, and the corpses, and the mist. A hand grabbed him round his neck, started squeezing his windpipe shut.

'Gurgh,' he croaked, fiddling at the hand, thinking his last moment was on him. Thinking all his hopes were turned to mud. The Great Leveller, come for him at last . . .

Then the fingers stopped squeezing.

'Dogman?' said someone in his ear, 'that you?'

'Gurgh.'

The hand let go his throat and he sucked in a breath. Felt himself pulled up by his coat. 'Shit on it, Dogman! I could ha' killed you!' He knew the voice now, well enough. Black Dow, the bastard. Dogman was half annoyed at being throttled near to dying, half stupid-happy at still being alive. He could hear Dow laughing at him. Hard laughter, like a crow calling. 'You alright?'

'I've had warmer greetings,' croaked Dogman, still doing his best to get the air in.

'Count yourself lucky, I could've given you a colder one. Much colder. I took you for one of Bethod's scouts. Thought you was out over yonder, up the valley.'

'As you can see,' he whispered, 'no. Where's the others at?'

'Up on a hill, above this fucking mist. Taking a look around.'

Dogman nodded back the way he'd come. 'There's corpses over there. Loads of 'em.'

'Loads of 'em is it?' asked Dow, as though he didn't think Dogman knew what a load of corpses looked like. 'Hah!'

'Aye, a good few anyway. Union dead, I reckon. Looks like there was a fight here.'

Black Dow laughed again. 'A fight? You reckon?' Dogman wasn't sure what he meant by that.

'Shit,' he said.

They were standing up on the hill, the five of them. The mist had cleared up, but the Dogman almost wished it hadn't. He saw what Dow had been saying now, well enough. The whole valley was full of dead. They were dotted high up on the slopes, wedged between the rocks, stretched out in the gorse. They were scattered out across the grass in the valley bottom like nails spilled from a sack, twisted and broken on the brown dirt road. They were heaped up beside the river, heaped on the banks in a pile. Arms and legs and broken gear sticking up from the last shreds of mist. They were everywhere. Stuck with arrows, stabbed with swords, hacked with axes. Crows called as they hopped from one meal to the next. It was a good day for the crows. It had been a while since Dogman saw a proper battlefield, and it brought back some sour memories. Horrible sour.

'Shit,' he said again. Couldn't think of aught else to say.

'Reckon the Union were marching up this road.' Threetrees was frowning hard. 'Reckon they were hurrying. Trying to catch Bethod unawares.'

'Seems they weren't scouting too careful,' rumbled Tul Duru. 'Seems like it was Bethod caught them out.'

'Maybe it was misty,' said Dogman, 'like today.'

Threetrees shrugged. 'Maybe. It's the time of year for it. Either way they were on the road, in column, tired from a long day's tramp. Bethod came on 'em from here, and from up there, on the ridge. Arrows first, to break 'em up, then the Carls, coming down from the tall ground, screaming and ready to go. The Union broke quick, I reckon.'

'Real quick,' said Dow.

'And then it was a slaughter. Spread out on the road. Trapped against the water. Nowhere much to run to. Men trying to pull their armour off, men trying to swim the river with their armour on. Packing in and climbing one on top o' the other, with arrows falling down all round. Some of 'em might've got as far as those woods down there, but knowing Bethod he'd have had a few horsemen tucked away, ready to lick the plate.'

'Shit,' said Dogman, feeling more than a bit sick. He'd been on the wrong end of a rout himself, and the memory weren't at all a happy one.

'Neat as good stitching,' said Threetrees. 'You got to give Bethod his due, the bastard. He knows his work, none better.'

'This the end of it then, chief?' asked Dogman. 'Bethod won already?'

Threetrees shook his head, nice and slow. 'There's a lot of Southerners out there. An awful lot. Most of 'em live across the sea. They say there's more of 'em down there than you can count. More men than there are trees in the North. Might take 'em a while to get here, but they'll be coming. This is just the beginning.'

The Dogman looked out at the wet valley, at all them dead men, huddled and sprawled and twisted across the ground, no more 'n food for crows. 'Not much of a beginning for them.'

Dow curled his tongue and spat, as noisy as he could. 'Penned up and slaughtered like a bunch o' sheep! You want to die like that, Threetrees? Eh? You want to side with the likes of these? Fucking Union! They don't know anything about war!'

Threetrees nodded. 'Then I reckon we'll have to teach 'em.'

There was a great press round the gate. There were women, gaunt and hungry-looking. There were children, ragged and dirty. There were men, old and young, stooped under heavy packs or clutching gear. Some had mules, or carts they were pushing, loaded up with all kinds of useless looking stuff. Wooden chairs, tin pots, tools for farming. A lot had nothing at all, besides misery. The Dogman reckoned there was plenty of that to go round.

They were choking up the road with their bodies and their rubbish. They were choking up the air with their pleading and their threatening. Dogman could smell the fear, thick as soup in his nose. All running from Bethod.

They were shouldering each other pretty good, some pushing in, some pushed out, here and there one falling in the mud, all desperate for that gate like it was their mother's tit. But as a crowd, they were going nowhere. Dogman could see spear tips glinting over the heads of the press, could hear hard voices shouting. There were soldiers up ahead, keeping everyone out of the city.

Dogman leaned over to Threetrees. 'Looks like they don't want their own kind,' he whispered. 'You reckon they'll want us, chief?'

'They need us, and that's a fact. We'll talk to 'em, and then we'll see, or you got some better notion?'

'Going home and staying out of it?' muttered Dogman under his breath, but he followed Threetrees into the crowd anyway.

The Southerners all gawped as they stepped on through. There was a little girl among 'em, looked at Dogman as he passed with great staring eyes, clutching some old rag to her. Dogman tried a smile but it had been a long time since he'd dealt with aught but hard men and hard metal, and it can't have come out too pleasing. The girl screamed and ran off, and she wasn't the only one scared. The crowd split open, wary and silent when they saw Dogman and Threetrees coming, even though they'd left their weapons back

with the others.

They made it through to the gate alright, only having to give the odd shove to one man or another, just to start him moving. Dogman saw the soldiers now, a dozen of 'em, stood in a line across the gate, each one just the same as the one next door. He'd rarely seen such heavy armour as they had on, great plates from head to toe, polished to a blinding shine, helmets over their faces, stock-still like metal pillars. He wondered how you'd fight one, if you had to. He couldn't imagine an arrow doing much, or a sword even, less it got lucky and found a joint.

'You'd need a pickaxe for that, or something.'

'What?' hissed Threetrees.

'Nothing.' It was plain they had some strange ideas about fighting down in the Union. If wars were won by the shinier side, they'd have had Bethod well licked, the Dogman reckoned. Shame they weren't.

Their chief was sat in the midst of them, behind a little table with some scraps of paper on it, and he was the strangest of the lot. He'd got some jacket on, bright red. An odd sort of cloth for a leader to wear, Dogman thought. You'd have picked him out with an arrow easy enough. He was mighty young for the job an' all. Scarcely had a beard on him yet, though he looked proud enough of himself all the same.

There was a big man in a dirty coat arguing with him. Dogman strained to listen, trying to make sense of their Union words. 'I've five children out here,' the farmer was saying, 'and nothing to feed them with. What do you suggest I do?'

An old man got in first. 'I'm a personal friend of the Lord Governor, I demand you admit me to the—'

The lad didn't let either one finish. 'I don't give a damn who your friends are, and I don't care if you have a hundred children! The city of Ostenhorm is full. Lord Marshal Burr has decreed that only two hundred refugees be admitted each day, and we have already reached our limit for this morning. I suggest you come back tomorrow. Early.'

The two men stood there staring. 'Your limit?' growled the farmer.

'But the Lord Governor—'

'Damn you!' screamed the lad, thumping at the table in a fit. 'Only push me further! I'll let you in alright! I'll have you dragged in, and hung as traitors!'

That was enough for those two, they backed off quick. Dogman was starting to think he should do the same, but Threetrees was already making for the table. The boy scowled up at 'em as though they stank worse than a pair of fresh turds. Dogman wouldn't have been so bothered, except he'd washed specially for the occasion. Hadn't been this clean in months. 'What the hell do you want? We've no need of spies or beggars!'

'Good,' said Threetrees, clear and patient. 'We're neither. My name is Rudd Threetrees. This here is the Dogman. We're come to speak to whoever's in charge. We're come to offer our services to your King.'

'Offer your services?' The lad started to smile. Not a friendly smile at all. 'Dogman, you say? What an interesting name. I can't imagine how he came by it.' He had himself a little snigger at that piece of cleverness, and Dogman could hear chuckles from the others. A right set of arseholes, he reckoned,

stitched up tight in their fancy clothes and their shiny armour. A right set of arseholes, but there was nothing to be gained by telling 'em so. It was a good thing they'd left Dow behind. He'd most likely have gutted this fool already, and got them all killed.

The lad leaned forward and spoke real slow, as if to children. 'No Northmen are allowed within the city, not without special permission.'

Seemed that Bethod crossing their borders, slaughtering their armies, making war across their lands weren't special enough. Threetrees ploughed on, but the Dogman reckoned he was ploughing in stony ground, alright. 'We're not asking much. Only food and a place to sleep. There's five of us, each one a Named Man, veterans all.'

'His Majesty is more than well supplied with soldiers. We are a little short of mules however. Perhaps you'd care to carry some supplies for us?'

Threetrees was known for his patience, but there was a limit to it, and Dogman reckoned they were awful close. This prick of a boy had no idea what he was stepping on. He weren't a man to be toyed with, Rudd Threetrees. It was a famous name where they came from. A name to put fear in men, or courage, depending where they stood. There was a limit to his patience alright, but they weren't quite at it yet. Luckily for all concerned.

'Mules, eh?' growled Threetrees. 'Mules can kick. Best make sure one don't kick your head off, boy.' And he turned around and stalked off, down the road the way they came, the scared folks shuffling out the way then crowding back in behind, all shouting at once, pleading with the soldiers why they should be the ones to get let in while the others were left out in the cold.

'That weren't quite the welcome we was hoping for,' Dogman muttered. Threetrees said nothing, just marched away in front, head down. 'What now, chief?'

The old boy shot a grim look over his shoulder. 'You know me. You think I'm taking that fucking answer?' Somehow, the Dogman reckoned not.

Best Laid Plans

It was cold in the hall of the Lord Governor of Angland. The high walls were of plain, cold render, the wide floor was of cold stone flags, the gaping fireplace held nothing but cold ashes. The only decoration was a great tapestry hanging at one end, the golden sun of the Union stitched into it, the crossed hammers of Angland in its centre.

Lord Governor Meed was slumped in a hard chair before a huge, bare table, staring at nothing, his right hand slack around the stem of a wine cup. His face was pale and hollow, his robes of state were crumpled and stained, his thin white hair was in disarray. Major West, born and raised in Angland, had often heard Meed spoken of as a strong leader, a great presence, a tireless champion of the province and its people. He looked a shell of a man now, crushed under the weight of his great chain of office, as empty and cold as his yawning fireplace.

The temperature might have been icy, but the mood was cooler still. Lord Marshal Burr stood in the middle of the floor, feet placed wide apart, big hands clasped white-knuckle tight behind his back. Major West stood at his shoulder, stiff as a log, head lowered, wishing that he had not given up his coat. It was colder in here than outside, if anything, and the weather was bitter, even for autumn.

‘Will you take wine, Lord Marshal?’ murmured Meed, not even looking up. His voice seemed weak and reedy thin in the great space. West fancied he could almost see the old man’s breath smoking.

‘No, your Grace. I will not.’ Burr was frowning. He had been frowning constantly, as far as West could tell, for the last month or two. The man seemed to have no other expressions. He had a frown for hope, a frown for satisfaction, a frown for surprise. This was a frown of the most intense anger. West shifted nervously from one numb foot to the other, trying to get the blood flowing, wishing he was anywhere but here.

‘What about you, Major West?’ whispered the Lord Governor. ‘Will you take wine?’ West opened his mouth to decline, but Burr got in first.

‘What happened?’ he growled, the hard words grating off the cold walls, echoing in the chilly rafters.

‘What happened?’ The Lord Governor shook himself, turned his sunken eyes slowly towards Burr, as though seeing him for the first time. ‘I lost my sons.’ He snatched up his cup with a trembling hand and drained it to the dregs.

West saw Marshal Burr’s hands clench tighter still behind his back. ‘I am sorry for your loss, your Grace, but I was referring to the broader situation. I am talking of Black Well.’

Meed seemed to flinch at the mere mention of the place. ‘There was a battle.’

‘There was a massacre!’ barked Burr. ‘What is your explanation? Did you

not receive the King's orders? To raise every soldier you could, to man your defences, to await reinforcements? Under no circumstances to risk battle with Bethod!

'The King's orders?' The Lord Governor's lip curled. 'The Closed Council's orders, do you mean? I received them. I read them. I considered them.'

'And then?'

'I tore them up.'

West could hear the Lord Marshal breathing hard through his nose. 'You tore . . . them up?'

'For a hundred years, I and my family have governed Angland. When we came here there was nothing.' Meed raised his chin proudly as he spoke, puffing out his chest. 'We tamed the wilderness. We cleared the forests, and laid the roads, and built the farms, and the mines, and the towns that have enriched the whole Union!'

The old man's eyes had brightened considerably. He seemed taller, bolder, stronger. 'The people of this land look first to me for protection, before they look across the sea! Was I to allow these Northmen, these barbarians, these animals to raid across my lands with impunity? To undo the great work of my forefathers? To rob, and burn, and rape, and kill as they pleased? To sit behind my walls while they put Angland to the sword? No, Marshal Burr! Not I! I gathered every man, and I armed them, and I sent them to meet the savages in battle, and my three sons went at their head. What else should I have done?'

'Followed your fucking orders!' screamed Burr at the very top of his voice. West started with shock, the thunderous echoes still ringing in his ears.

Meed twitched, then gaped, then his lip began to quiver. Tears welled up in the old man's eyes and his body sagged again. 'I lost my sons,' he whispered, staring down at the cold floor. 'I lost my sons.'

'I pity your sons, and all those others whose lives were wasted, but I do not pity you. You alone brought this upon yourself.' Burr winced, then swallowed and rubbed at his stomach. He walked slowly to the window and looked out over the cold, grey city. 'You have wasted all your strength, and now I must dilute my own to garrison your towns, your fortresses. Such survivors as there are from Black Well, and such others as are armed and can fight you will transfer to my command. We will need every man.'

'And me?' murmured Meed, 'I daresay those dogs on the Closed Council are howling for my blood?'

'Let them howl. I need you here. Refugees are coming southwards, fleeing from Bethod, or from the fear of him. Have you looked out of your window lately? Ostenhorm is full of them. They crowd around the walls in their thousands, and this is only the beginning. You will see to their well-being, and their evacuation to Midderland. For thirty years your people have looked to you for protection. They have need of you still.'

Burr turned back into the room. 'You will provide Major West with a list of those units still fit for action. As for the refugees, they are in need of food, and clothing, and shelter. Preparations for their evacuation should begin at once.'

'At once,' whispered Meed. 'At once, of course.'

Burr flashed West a quick glance from under his thick eyebrows, took a

deep breath then strode for the door. West looked back as he left. The Lord Governor of Angland still sat hunched in his chair in his empty, freezing hall, head in his hands.

‘This is Angland,’ said West, gesturing at the great map. He turned to look at the assembly. Few of the officers were showing the slightest interest in what he had to say. Hardly a surprise, but it still rankled.

General Kroy was sitting on the right-hand side of the long table, stiff upright and motionless in his chair. He was tall, gaunt, hard, grey hair cropped close to his angular skull, black uniform simple and spotless. His enormous staff were similarly clipped, shaved, polished, as dour as a bevy of mourners. Opposite, on the left, lounged General Poulder, round-faced, ruddy-skinned, possessed of a tremendous set of moustaches. His great collar, stiff with gold thread, came almost to his large, pink ears. His retinue sat their chairs like saddles, crimson uniforms dripping with braid, top buttons carelessly undone, spatters of mud from the road worn like medals.

On Kroy’s side of the room, war was all about cleanliness, self-denial, and strict obedience to the rules. On Poulder’s it was a matter of flamboyance and carefully organised hair. Each group glared across the table at the other with haughty contempt, as though only they held the secrets of good soldiering, and the other crowd, try as they might, would never be more than a hindrance.

Either were hindrance enough to West’s mind, but neither one was half the obstacle that the third lot presented, clustered around the far end of the table. Their leader was none other than the heir to the throne, Crown Prince Ladisla himself. It was not so much a uniform that he was wearing, as a kind of purple dressing gown with epaulettes. Bedwear with a military motif. The lace on his cuffs alone could have made a good-sized tablecloth, and his staff were little less remarkable in their finery. Some of the richest, most handsome, most elegant, most useless young men in the whole Union were sprawled in their chairs around the Prince. If the measure of a man was the size of his hat, these were great men indeed.

West turned back to the map, his throat uncomfortably dry. He knew what he had to say, he needed only to say it, as clearly as possible, and sit down. Never mind that some of the most senior men in the army were behind him. Not to mention the heir to the throne. Men who West knew despised him. Hated him for his high position and his low birth. For the fact that he had earned his place.

‘This is Angland,’ said West again, in what he hoped was a voice of calm authority. ‘The river Cumnur,’ and the end of his stick traced the twisting blue line of the river, ‘splits the province into two parts. The southern part is much the smaller, but contains the great majority of the population and almost all the significant towns, including the capital, Ostenhorm. The roads here are reasonably good, the country relatively open. As far as we know, the Northmen have yet to set foot across the river.’

West heard a loud yawning behind him, clearly audible even from the far end of the table. He felt a sudden pang of fury and spun round. Prince Ladisla

himself appeared, at least, to be listening attentively. The culprit was one of his staff, the young Lord Smund, a man of impeccable lineage and immense fortune, a little over twenty but with all the talents of a precocious ten-year-old. He was slouched in his chair, staring into space, mouth extravagantly gaping.

It was the most West could do to stop himself leaping over and thrashing the man with his stick. 'Am I boring you?' he hissed.

Smund actually seemed surprised to be picked on. He stared left and right, as though West might have been talking to one of his neighbours. 'What, me? No, no, Major West, not in the least. Boring? No! The River Cumnur splits the province in two, and so forth. Thrilling stuff! Thrilling! I do apologise, really. Late night, last night, you see?'

West did not doubt it. A late night spent drinking and showing off with the rest of the Prince's hangers-on, all so that he could waste everyone's time this morning. Kroy's men might be pedantic, and Poulder's arrogant, but at least they were soldiers. The Prince's staff had no skills whatever, as far as West could see, beyond annoying him, of course. At that, they were all expert. He was almost grinding his teeth with frustration as he turned back to the map.

'The northern part of the province is a different matter,' he growled. 'An unwelcoming expanse of dense forests, trackless bogs, and broken hills, sparsely populated. There are mines, logging camps, villages, as well as several penal colonies operated by the Inquisition, but they are widely scattered. There are only two roads even faintly suitable for large bodies of men or supplies, especially given that winter will soon be upon us.' His stick traced the two dotted lines, running north to south through the woods. 'The western road goes close to the mountains, linking the mining communities. The eastern one follows the coast, more or less. They meet at the fortress of Dunbrec on the Whiteflow, the northern border of Angland. That fortress, as we all know, is already in the hands of the enemy.'

West turned away from the map and sat down, trying to breathe slow and steady, squash down his anger and see off the headache which was already starting to pulse behind his eyes.

'Thank you, Major West,' said Burr as he got to his feet to address the assembly. The room rustled and stirred, only now coming awake. The Lord Marshal strode up and down before the map for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Then he tapped at it with his own stick, a spot well to the north of the Cumnur.

'The village of Black Well. An unremarkable settlement, ten miles or so from the coast road. Little more than a huddle of houses, now entirely deserted. It isn't even marked on the map. A place unworthy of anyone's attention. Except, of course, that it is the site of a recent massacre of our troops by the Northmen.'

'Damn fool Anglanders,' someone muttered.

'They should have waited for us,' said Poulder, with a self-satisfied smirk.

'Indeed they should have,' snapped Burr. 'But they were confident, and why not? Several thousand men, well equipped, with cavalry. Many of them were professional soldiers. Not in the same class as the King's Own perhaps, but trained and determined nonetheless. More than a match for these savages, one

would have thought.'

'They put up a good fight though,' interrupted Prince Ladisla, 'eh, Marshal Burr?'

Burr glared down the table. 'A good fight is one you win, your Highness. They were slaughtered. Only those with good horses and very good luck escaped. In addition to the regrettable waste of manpower, there is the loss of equipment and supplies. Considerable quantities of each, with which our enemy is now enriched. Most seriously, perhaps, the defeat has caused panic among the population. The roads our army will depend on are clogged with refugees, convinced that Bethod will come upon their farms, their villages, their homes at any moment. An utter disaster, of course. Perhaps the worst suffered by the Union in recent memory. But disasters are not without their lessons.'

The Lord Marshal planted his big hands firmly on the table and leaned forwards. 'This Bethod is careful, clever, and ruthless. He is well supplied with horse, foot, and archers, and has sufficient organisation to use them together. He has excellent scouts and his forces are highly mobile, probably more so than ours, especially in difficult country, such as that we will face in the northern part of the province. He set a trap for the Anglanders and they fell into it. We must not do the same.'

General Kroy gave a snort of joyless laughter. 'So we should fear these barbarians, Lord Marshal? Would that be your advice?'

'What was it that Stolicus wrote, General Kroy? "Never fear your enemy, but always respect him." I suppose that would be my advice, if I gave any.' Burr frowned across the table. 'But I don't give advice. I give orders.'

Kroy twitched with displeasure at the reprimand, but at least he shut up. For the time being. West knew that he wouldn't stay quiet for long. He never did.

'We must be cautious,' continued Burr, now addressing the room at large, 'but we still have the advantage. We have twelve regiments of the King's Own, at least as many men in levies from the noblemen, and a few Anglanders who avoided the carnage at Black Well. Judging from such reports as we have, we outnumber our enemy by five to one, or more. We have the advantage in equipment, in tactics, in organisation. The Northmen, it seems, are not ignorant of this. Despite their successes, they are remaining north of the Cumnur, content to forage and mount the odd raid. They do not seem keen to come across the river and risk an open battle with us.'

'One can hardly blame 'em, the dirty cowards,' chuckled Poulder, to mutterings of agreement from his own staff. 'Probably regretting they ever crossed the border now!'

'Perhaps,' murmured Burr. 'In any case, they are not coming to us, so we must cross the river and hunt them down. The main body of our army will therefore be split into two parts, the left wing under General Kroy, the right under General Poulder.' The two men eyed each other across the table with the deepest hostility. 'We will push up the eastern road from our camps here at Ostenhorm, spread out beyond the river Cumnur, hoping to locate Bethod's army and bring him to a decisive battle.'

'With the greatest respect,' interrupted General Kroy, in a tone that implied

he had none, 'would it not be better to send one half of the army up the western road?'

'The west has little to offer aside from iron, the one thing with which the Northmen are already well supplied. The coast road offers richer pickings, and is closer to their own lines of supply and retreat. Besides, I do not wish our forces to be too thinly spread. We are still guessing at Bethod's strength. If we can bring him to battle, I want to be able to concentrate our forces quickly, and overwhelm him.'

'But, Lord Marshal!' Kroy had the air of a man addressing a senile parent who still, alas, retains the management of their own affairs. 'Surely the western road should not be left unguarded?'

'I was coming to that,' growled Burr, turning back to the map. 'A third detachment, under the command of Crown Prince Ladisla, will dig in behind the Cumnur and stand guard on the western road. It will be their job to make sure the Northmen do not slip around us and gain our rear. They will hold there, south of the river, while our main body splits in two and flushes out the enemy.'

'Of course, my Lord Marshal.' Kroy sat back in his chair with a thunderous sigh, as though he had expected no better but had to try anyway, for everyone's sake, while the officers of his staff tutted and clucked their disapproval for the scheme.

'Well, I find it an excellent plan,' announced Poulder warmly. He smirked across the table at Kroy. 'I am entirely in favour, Lord Marshal. I am at your disposal in any way you should think fit. I shall have my men ready to march within ten days.' His staff nodded and hummed their assent.

'Five would be better,' said Burr.

Poulder's plump face twitched his annoyance, but he quickly mastered himself. 'Five it is, Lord Marshal.' But now it was Kroy's turn to look smug.

Crown Prince Ladisla, meanwhile, was squinting at the map, an expression of puzzlement slowly forming on his well-powdered face. 'Lord Marshal Burr,' he began slowly, 'my detachment is to proceed down the western road to the river, correct?'

'Indeed, your Highness.'

'But we are not to pass beyond the river?'

'Indeed not, your Highness.'

'Our role is to be, then,' and he squinted up at Burr with a hurt expression, 'a purely defensive one?'

'Indeed. Purely defensive.'

Ladisla frowned. 'That sounds a meagre task.' His absurd staff shifted in their seats, grumbled their discontent at an assignment so far beneath their talents.

'A meagre task? Pardon me, your Highness, but not so! Angland is a wide and tangled country. The Northmen may elude us, and if they do it is on you that all our hopes will hang. It will be your task to prevent the enemy from crossing the river and threatening our lines of supply, or, worse yet, marching on Ostenhorm itself.' Burr leaned forward, fixing the Prince with his eye, and shook his fist with great authority. 'You will be our rock, your Highness, our pillar, our foundation! You will be the hinge on which the gate will hang, a

gate which will swing shut on these invaders, and drive them out of England!’

West was impressed. The Prince’s assignment was indeed a meagre one, but the Lord Marshal could have made mucking out the latrines sound like noble work. ‘Excellent!’ exclaimed Ladisla, the feather on his hat thrashing back and forth. ‘The hinge, of course! Capital!’

‘Unless there are any further questions then, gentlemen, we have a great deal of work to do.’ Burr looked round the half-circle of sulky faces. No one spoke. ‘Dismissed.’

Kroy’s staff and Poulder’s exchanged frosty glances as they hurried to be first out of the room. The two great generals themselves jostled each other in the doorway, which was more than wide enough for both of them, neither wanting to turn his back on the other, or to follow behind him. They turned, bristling, once they had pushed their way out into the corridor.

‘General Kroy,’ sneered Poulder, with a haughty toss of his head.

‘General Poulder,’ hissed Kroy, tugging his impeccable uniform smooth.

Then they stalked off in opposite directions.

As the last of Prince Ladisla’s staff ambled out, holding forth to each other noisily about who had the most expensive armour, West got up to leave himself. He had a hundred tasks to be getting on with, and there was nothing to be gained by waiting. Before he got to the door, though, Lord Marshal Burr began to speak.

‘So there’s our army, eh, West? I swear, I sometimes feel like a father with a set of squabbling sons, and no wife to help me. Poulder, Kroy, and Ladisla.’ He shook his head. ‘My three commanders! Every man of them seems to think the purpose of this whole business is his personal aggrandisement. There aren’t three bigger heads in the whole Union. It’s a wonder we can fit them all in one room.’ He gave a sudden burp. ‘Damn this indigestion!’

West racked his brains for something positive. ‘General Poulder seems obedient, at least, sir.’

Burr snorted. ‘Seems, yes, but I trust him even less than Kroy, if that’s possible. Kroy, at least, is predictable. He can be depended on to frustrate and oppose me at every turn. Poulder can’t be depended on at all. He’ll smirk, and flatter, and obey to the tiniest detail, until he sees some advantage to himself, and then he’ll turn on me with double the ferocity, you’ll see. To keep ’em both happy is impossible.’ He squinted and swallowed, rubbing at his gut. ‘But as long as we can keep them equally unhappy, we’ve a chance. The one thing to be thankful for is that they hate each other even more than they do me.’

Burr’s frown grew deeper. ‘They were both ahead of me in the queue for my job. General Poulder is an old friend of the Arch Lector, you know. Kroy is Chief Justice Marovia’s cousin. When the post of Lord Marshal became available, the Closed Council couldn’t decide between them. In the end they fixed on me as an unhappy compromise. An oaf from the provinces, eh, West? That’s what I am to them. An effective oaf to be sure, but an oaf still. I daresay that if Poulder or Kroy died tomorrow, I’d be replaced the next day by the other. It’s hard to imagine a more ludicrous situation for a Lord Marshal, until you add in the Crown Prince, that is.’

West almost winced. How to turn that nightmare into an advantage? ‘Prince Ladisla is . . . enthusiastic?’ he ventured.

‘Where would I be without your optimism?’ Burr gave a mirthless chuckle. ‘Enthusiastic? He’s living in a dream! Pandered to, and coddled, and utterly spoiled his whole life! That boy and the real world are entire strangers to one another!’

‘Must he have a separate command, sir?’

The Lord Marshal rubbed at his eyes with his thick fingers. ‘Unfortunately, he must. The Closed Council have been most specific on that point. They are concerned that the King is in poor health, and that his heir is seen as an utter fool and wastrel by the public. They hope we might win some great victory here, so they can heap the credit on the Prince. Then they’ll ship him back to Adua, glowing with the glamour of the battlefield, ready to become the kind of King the peasants love.’

Burr paused for a moment, and looked down at the floor. ‘I’ve done all I can to keep Ladisla out of trouble. I’ve put him where I think the Northmen aren’t, and with any luck won’t ever be. But war is anything but a predictable business. Ladisla might actually be called upon to fight. That’s why I need someone to look over his shoulder. Someone with experience in the field. Someone as tenacious and hard-working as his joke of a staff are soft and lazy. Someone who might stop the Prince blundering into trouble.’ He looked up from under his heavy brows.

West felt a horrible sinking sensation in his guts. ‘Me?’

‘I’m afraid so. There’s no one I’d rather keep, but the Prince has asked for you personally.’

‘For me, sir? But I’m no courtier! I’m not even a nobleman!’

Burr snorted. ‘Aside from me, Ladisla is probably the one man in this army who doesn’t care whose son you are. He’s the heir to the throne! Nobleman or beggar, we’re all equally far below him.’

‘But why me?’

‘Because you’re a fighter. First through the breach at Ulrioch and all that. You’ve seen action, and plenty of it. You’ve a fighter’s reputation, West, and the Prince wants one himself. That’s why.’ Burr fished a letter from his jacket and handed it across. ‘Maybe this will help to sweeten the medicine.’

West broke the seal, unfolded the thick paper, scanned the few lines of neat writing. When he had finished, he read it again, just to be sure. He looked up. ‘It’s a promotion.’

‘I know what it is. I arranged it. Maybe they’ll take you a little more seriously with an extra star on your jacket, maybe they won’t. Either way, you deserve it.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said West numbly.

‘What, for the worst job in the army?’ Burr laughed, and gave him a fatherly clap on the shoulder. ‘You’ll be missed, and that’s a fact. I’m riding out to inspect the first regiment. A commander should show his face, I’ve always thought. Care to join me, Colonel?’

Snow was falling by the time they rode out through the city gates. White specks blowing on the wind, melting as soon as they touched the road, the trees, the coat of West’s horse, the armour of the guards that followed them.

'Snow,' Burr grumbled over his shoulder. 'Snow already. Isn't that a little early in the year?'

'Very early, sir, but it's cold enough.' West took one hand from his reins to pull his coat tighter round his neck. 'Colder than usual, for the end of autumn.'

'It'll be a damn sight colder up north of the Cumnur, I'll be bound.'

'Yes, sir, and it won't be getting any warmer now.'

'Could be a harsh winter, eh, Colonel?'

'Very likely, sir.' Colonel? Colonel West? The words still seemed strange together, even in his own mind. No one could ever have dreamed a commoner's son would go so far. Himself least of all.

'A long, harsh winter,' Burr was musing. 'We need to catch Bethod quickly. Catch him and put a quick end to him, before we all freeze.' He frowned at the trees as they slipped by, frowned up at the flecks of snow eddying around them, frowned over at West. 'Bad roads, bad ground, bad weather. Not the best situation, eh, Colonel?'

'No, sir,' said West glumly, but it was his own situation that was worrying him.

'Come now, it could be worse. You'll be dug in south of the river, nice and warm. Probably won't see a hair of a Northman all winter. And I hear the Prince and his staff eat pretty well. A damn stretch better than blundering around in the snow with Poulder and Kroy for company.'

'Of course, sir.' But West was less than sure.

Burr glanced over his shoulder at the guards, trotting along at a respectful distance. 'You know, when I was a young man, before I was given the dubious honour of commanding the King's army, I used to love to ride. I'd ride for miles, at the gallop. Made me feel . . . alive. Seems like there's no time for it these days. Briefings, and documents, and sitting at tables, that's all I do. Sometimes, you just want to ride, eh, West?'

'Of course, sir, but now would—'

'Yah!' The Lord Marshal dug his spurs in with a will and his horse bolted down the track, mud flicking up from its hooves. West gaped after him for a moment.

'Damn it,' he whispered. The stubborn old fool would most likely get thrown and break his thick neck. Then where would they be? Prince Ladisla would have to take command. West shivered at the prospect, and kicked his own horse into a gallop. What choice did he have?

The trees flashed past on either side, the road flowed by underneath him. His ears filled with the clattering of hooves, the rattling of harness. The wind rushed in his mouth, stung his eyes. The snow flakes came at him, straight on. West snatched a look over his shoulder. The guards were tangled up with each other, horses jostling, lagging far back down the road.

It was the best he could do to keep up and stay in his saddle at the same time. The last time he'd ridden so hard had been years ago, pounding across a dry plain with a wedge of Gurkish cavalry just behind him. He'd hardly been any more scared then. His hands were gripping the reins painfully tight, his heart was hammering with fear and excitement. He realised that he was smiling. Burr had been right. It did make him feel alive.

The Lord Marshal had slowed, and West reined his own horse in as he drew

level. He was laughing now, and he could hear Burr chuckling beside him. He hadn't laughed like that in months. Years maybe, he couldn't remember the last time. Then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

He felt a sickening jolt, a crushing pain in his chest. His head snapped forward, the reins were ripped from his hands, everything turned upside down. His horse was gone. He was rolling on the ground, over and over.

He tried to get up and the world lurched. Trees and white sky, a horse's kicking legs, dirt flying. He stumbled and pitched into the road, took a mouthful of mud. Someone helped him up, pulling roughly at his coat, dragging him into the woods.

'No,' he gasped, hardly able to breathe for the pain in his chest. There was no reason to go that way.

A black line between the trees. He staggered forward, bent double, tripping over the tails of his coat, crashing through the undergrowth. A rope across the road, pulled tight as they passed. Someone was half dragging him, half carrying him. His head was spinning, all sense of direction lost. A trap. West fumbled for his sword. It took him a moment to realise that his scabbard was empty.

The Northmen. West felt a stab of terror in his gut. The Northmen had him, and Burr too. Assassins, sent by Bethod to kill them. There was a rushing sound somewhere, out beyond the trees. West struggled to make sense of it. The guards, following down the road. If he could only give them a signal somehow . . .

'Over here . . . ' he croaked, pitifully hoarse, before a dirty hand clamped itself over his mouth, dragged him down into the wet undergrowth. He struggled as best he could, but there was no strength in him. He could see the guards flashing by through the trees, no more than a dozen strides away, but he was powerless.

He bit the hand, as hard as he could, but it only gripped tighter, squeezing his jaw, crushing his lips. He could taste blood. His own blood maybe, or blood from the hand. The sound of the guards faded into the woods and was gone, and fear pressed in behind it. The hand let go, gave him a parting shove and he tumbled onto his back.

A face swam into view above him. A hard, gaunt, brutish face, black hair hacked short, teeth bared in an animal scowl, cold, flat eyes, brimful of fury. The face turned and spat on the ground. There was no ear on the other side of it. Just a flap of pink scar, and a hole.

Never in his life had West seen such an evil-looking man. The whole set of him was violence itself. He looked strong enough to tear West in half, and more than willing to do it. There was blood running from a wound in his hand. The wound that West's teeth had made. It dripped from his fingertips onto the forest floor. In his other fist he held a length of smooth wood. West's eyes followed it, horrified. There was a heavy, curved blade at the end, polished bright. An axe.

So this was a Northman. Not the kind who rolled drunk in the gutters of Adua. Not the kind who had come to his father's farm to beg for work. The other kind. The kind his mother had scared him with stories of when he was a child. A man whose work, and whose pastime, and whose purpose, was to kill.

West looked from that hard blade to those hard eyes and back, numb with horror. He was finished. He would die here in the cold forest, down in the dirt like a dog.

West dragged himself up by one hand, seized by a sudden impulse to run. He looked over his shoulder, but there was no escape that way. A man was moving through the trees towards them. A big man with a thick beard and a sword over his shoulder, carrying a child in his arms. West blinked, trying to get some sense of scale. It was the biggest man he had ever seen, and the child was Lord Marshal Burr. The giant tossed his burden down on the ground like a bundle of sticks. Burr stared up at him, and burped.

West ground his teeth. Riding off like that, the old fool, what had he been thinking? He'd killed them both with his fucking 'sometimes you just want to ride'. Makes you feel alive? Neither one of them would live out the hour.

He had to fight. Now might be his last chance. Even if he had nothing to fight with. Better to die that way than on his knees in the mud. He tried to dig the anger out. There was no end to it, when he didn't want it. Now there was nothing. Just a desperate helplessness that weighed down every limb.

Some hero. Some fighter. It was the most he could do to keep from pissing himself. He could hit a woman alright. He could throttle his sister half to death. The memory of it still made him choke with shame and revulsion, even with his own death staring him in the face. He had thought he would make it right later. Only now there was no later. This was all there was. He felt tears in his eyes.

'Sorry,' he muttered to himself. 'I'm sorry.' He closed his eyes and waited for the end.

'No need for sorry, friend, I reckon he's been bitten harder.'

Another Northman had melted out of the woods, crouching down beside West on his haunches. Lank, matted brown hair hung around his lean face. Quick, dark eyes. Clever eyes. He cracked a wicked grin, anything but reassuring. Two rows of hard, yellow, pointed teeth. 'Sit,' he said, accent so thick that West could scarcely understand him. 'Sit and be still is best.'

A fourth man was standing over him and Burr. A great, broadchested man, his wrists as thick as West's ankles. There were grey hairs in his beard, in his tangled hair. The leader, it seemed, from the way the others made room for him. He looked down at West, slow and thoughtful, as a man might look at an ant, deciding whether or not to squash it under his boot.

'Which of 'em's Burr, do you think?' he rumbled in Northern.

'I'm Burr,' said West. Had to protect the Lord Marshal. Had to. He clambered up without thinking, but he was still dizzy from the fall, and he had to grab hold of a branch to stop himself falling. 'I'm Burr.'

The old warrior looked him up and down, slow and steady. 'You?' He burst into a peal of laughter, deep and menacing as a storm in the distance. 'I like that! That's nice!' He turned to the evil-looking one. 'See? I thought you said they got no guts, these Southerners?'

'It was brains I said they was short on.' The one-eared man glowered down at West the way a hungry cat looks at a bird. 'And I've yet to see otherwise.'

'I think it's this one.' The leader was looking down at Burr. 'You Burr?' he asked in the common tongue.

The Lord Marshal looked at West, then up at the towering Northmen, then he got slowly to his feet. He straightened and brushed down his uniform, like a man preparing to die with dignity. 'I'm Burr, and I'll not entertain you. If you mean to kill us, you should do it now.' West stayed where he was. Dignity hardly seemed worth the effort now. He could almost feel the axe biting into his head already.

But the Northman with the grey in his beard only smiled. 'I can see how you'd make that mistake, and we're sorry if we've frayed your nerves at all, but we're not here to kill you. We're here to help you.' West struggled to make sense of what he was hearing.

Burr was doing the same. 'To help us?'

'There's plenty in the North who hate Bethod. There's plenty who don't kneel willing, and some who don't kneel at all. That's us. We've a feud with that bastard has been a long time brewing, and we mean to settle it, or die in the trying. We can't fight him alone, but we hear you're fighting him, so we reckoned we'd join you.'

'Join us?'

'We came a long way to do it, and from what we seen on the way you could use the help. But when we got here, your people weren't keen to take us.'

'They was somewhat rude,' said the lean one, squatting next to West.

'They was indeed, Dogman, they was indeed. But we ain't men to back off at a little rudeness. That's when I hit on the notion of talking to you, chief to chief, you might say.'

Burr stared over at West. 'They want to fight with us,' he said. West blinked back, still trying to come to terms with the notion that he might live out the day. The one called Dogman was holding out a sword towards him, hilt first, and grinning. It took West a moment to realise it was his own.

'Thanks,' muttered West as he fumbled with the grip.

'No bother.'

'There's five of us,' the leader was saying, 'all Named Men and veterans. We've fought against Bethod, and we've fought with him, all across the North. We know his style, few better. We can scout, we can fight, we can lay surprises, as you see. We'll not shirk any task worth the doing, and any task that hurts Bethod is worth it to us. What do you say?'

'Well . . . er,' murmured Burr, rubbing his chin with his thumb. 'You plainly are a most . . . ' and he looked from one hard, dirty, scarred face to the next ' . . . useful set of men. How could I resist an offer so graciously made?'

'Then I better make the introductions. This here is the Dogman.'

'That's me,' growled the lean one with the pointy teeth, flashing his worrying grin again. 'Good to meet.' He grabbed hold of West's hand and squeezed it until his knuckles clicked.

Threetrees jerked his thumb sideways at the evil one with the axe and the missing ear. 'This friendly fellow's Black Dow. I'd say he gets better with time, but he don't.' Dow turned and spat on the ground again. 'The big lad is Tul Duru. They call him the Thunderhead. Then there's Harding Grim. He's off out there in the trees, keeping your horses off the road. Not to worry though, he'd have nothing to say.'

'And you?'

‘Rudd Threetrees. Leader of this little crew, on account of our previous leader having gone back to the mud.’

‘Back to the mud, I see.’ Burr took a deep breath. ‘Well then. You can report to Colonel West. I’m sure that he can find food and quarters for you, not to mention work.’

‘Me?’ asked West, sword still dangling from his hand.

‘Absolutely.’ The Lord Marshal had the tiniest smile at the corner of his mouth. ‘Our new allies should fit right in with Prince Ladisla’s retinue.’ West couldn’t decide whether to laugh or cry. Just when he had thought his situation could not be any more difficult, he had five primitives to handle.

Threetrees seemed happy enough with the outcome. ‘Good,’ he said, slowly nodding his approval. ‘That’s settled then.’

‘Settled,’ said the Dogman, his evil smile growing wider still.

The one called Black Dow gave West a long, cold stare.

‘Fucking Union,’ he growled.

Questions

To Sand dan Glokta,

Superior of Dagoska, and for his eyes alone.

You will take ship immediately, and assume command of the Inquisition in the city of Dagoska. You will establish what became of your predecessor, Superior Davoust. You will investigate his suspicion that a conspiracy is afoot, perhaps in the city's ruling council itself. You will examine the members of that council, and uproot any and all disloyalty. Punish treason with scant mercy, but ensure that your evidence is sound. We can afford no further blunders.

Gurkish soldiers already crowd to the peninsula, ready to exploit any weakness. The King's regiments are fully committed in Angland, so you can expect little help should the Gurkish attack. You will therefore ensure that the defences of the city are strong, and that provisions are sufficient to withstand any siege. You will keep me informed of your progress in regular letters. Above all, you will ensure that Dagoska does not, under any circumstances, fall into the hands of the Gurkish.

Do not fail me.

Sult

Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.

Glokta folded the letter carefully and slipped it back into his pocket, checking once again that the King's writ was safe beside it. Damn thing. The big document had been weighing heavily in his coat ever since the Arch Lector passed it to him. He pulled it out and turned it over in his hands, the gold leaf on the big red seal glittering in the harsh sunlight. *A single sheet of paper, yet worth more than gold. Priceless. With this, I speak with the King's own voice. I am the most powerful man in Dagoska, greater even than the Lord Governor himself. All must hear me and obey. As long as I can stay alive, that is.*

The voyage had not been a pleasant one. The ship was small and the Circle Sea had been rough on the way over. Glokta's own cabin was tiny, hot and close as an oven. *An oven swaying wildly all day and all night.* If he had not been trying to eat gruel with the bowl slopping crazily around, he had been vomiting back up those small amounts he had actually managed to swallow. But at least below decks there was no chance of his useless leg giving way and dumping him over the side into the sea. *Yes, the voyage has hardly been pleasant.*

But now the voyage was over. The ship was already slipping up to its mooring in amongst the crowded wharves. The sailors were already struggling with the anchor, throwing ropes on to the dock. Now the gangplank was sliding across from ship to dusty shore.

'Right,' said Practical Severard. 'I'm going to get me a drink.'

'Make it a strong one, but see you catch up with me later. We'll have work to do tomorrow. Lots of work.'

Severard nodded, lanky hair swaying around his thin face. 'Oh, I live to serve.' *I'm not sure what you live for, but I doubt it's that.* He sauntered off,

whistling tunelessly, clattered across the plank, down the wharf and off between the dusty brown buildings beyond.

Glokta eyed the narrow length of wood with not a little worry, worked his hand around the handle of his cane, tongued at his empty gums, building himself up to stepping on to it. An act of selfless heroism indeed. He wondered for a moment whether he would be wiser to crawl across on his stomach. *It would reduce the chance of a watery death, but it would hardly be appropriate, would it? The city's awe-inspiring Superior of the Inquisition, slithering into his new domain on his belly?*

'Need a hand?' Practical Vitari was looking at him sideways, leaning back on the ship's handrail, red hair sticking up off her head like the spines on a thistle. She seemed to have spent the entire journey basking in the open air like a lizard, quite unmoved by the reeling of the ship, enjoying the crushing heat every bit as much as Glokta despised it. It was hard to judge her expression beneath her black Practical's mask. *But it's a good bet she's smiling. No doubt she's already preparing her first report to the Arch Lector: 'The cripple spent most of the voyage below decks, puking. When we arrived at Dagoska he had to be hoisted ashore with the cargo. Already he has become a laughing stock . . .'*

'Of course not!' snapped Glokta, hobbling up onto the plank as though he took his life in his hands every morning. It wobbled alarmingly as he planted his right foot on it, and he became painfully aware of the grey-green water slapping at the slimy stones of the quay a long drop below him. *Body found floating by the docks . . .*

But in the end he was able to shuffle across without incident, dragging his withered leg behind him. He felt an absurd pang of pride when he made it to the dusty stones of the docks and finally stood on dry land again. *Ridiculous. Anyone would think I'd beaten the Gurkish and saved the city already, rather than hobbled three strides.* To add insult to injury, now that he had become used to the constant lurching of the ship, the stillness of land was making his head spin and his stomach roll, and the rotten salt stink of the baking docks was very far from helping. He forced himself to swallow a mouthful of bitter spit, closed his eyes and turned his face towards the cloudless sky.

Hell, but it's hot. Glokta had forgotten how hot the South could be. Late in the year, and still the sun was blazing down, still he was running with sweat under his long black coat. *The garments of the Inquisition may be excellent for instilling terror in a suspect, but I fear they are poorly suited to a hot climate.*

Practical Frost was even worse off. The hulking albino had covered every exposed inch of his milky skin, even down to black gloves and a wide hat. He peered up at the brilliant sky, pink eyes narrowed with suspicion and misery, broad white face beaded with sweat around his black mask.

Vitari peered sidelong at the pair of them. 'You two really should get out more,' she muttered.

A man in Inquisitor's black was waiting at the end of the wharf, sticking close to the shade of a crumbling wall but still sweating generously. A tall, bony man with bulging eyes, his hooked nose red and peeling from sunburn. *The welcoming committee? Judging by its scale, I am scarcely welcome at all.*

'I am Harker, senior Inquisitor in the city.'

'Until I arrived,' snapped Glokta. 'How many others have you?'

The Inquisitor frowned. 'Four Inquisitors and some twenty Practicals.'

'A small complement, to keep a city of this size free of treason.'

Harker's frown grew more surly yet. 'We've always managed.' *Oh, indeed. Apart from mislaying your Superior, of course.* 'This is your first visit to Dagoska?'

'I have spent some time in the South.' *The best days of my life, and the worst.* 'I was in Gurkhul during the war. I saw Ulrioch.' *In ruins after we burned the city.* 'And I was in Shaffa for two years.' *If you count the Emperor's Prisons. Two years in the boiling heat and the crushing darkness. Two years in hell.* 'But I have never been to Dagoska.'

'Huh,' snorted Harker, unimpressed. 'Your quarters are in the Citadel.' He nodded towards the great rock that loomed up over the city. *Of course they are. In the very highest part of the highest building, no doubt.* 'I'll show you the way. Lord Governor Vurms and his council will be keen to meet their new Superior.' He turned with a look of some bitterness. *Feel you should have got the job yourself, eh? I'm delighted to disappoint you.*

Harker set off into the city at a brisk pace, Practical Frost trudging along beside him, heavy shoulders hunched around his thick neck, sticking to every trace of shade as though the sun were shooting tiny darts at him. Vitari zig-zagged across the dusty street as if it was a dance-floor, peering through windows and down narrow side-streets. Glokta shuffled along doggedly behind, his left leg already starting to burn with the effort.

'The cripple shuffled only three strides into the city before he fell on his face, and had to be carried the rest of the way by stretcher, squealing like a half-slaughtered pig and begging for water, while the very citizens he was sent to terrify watched, dumbstruck . . .'

He curled his lips back and dug his remaining teeth into his empty gums, forced himself to keep pace with the others, the handle of his cane cutting into his palm, his spine giving an agonising click with every step.

'This is the Lower City,' grumbled Harker over his shoulder, 'where the native population are housed.'

A giant, boiling, dusty, stinking slum. The buildings were mean and badly maintained: rickety shacks of one storey, leaning piles of half-baked mud bricks. The people were all dark-skinned, poorly dressed, hungry-looking. A bony woman peered out at them from a doorway. An old man with one leg hobbled past on bent crutches. Down a narrow alley ragged children darted between piles of refuse. The air was heavy with the stink of rot and bad sewers. *Or no sewers at all.* Flies buzzed everywhere. Fat, angry flies. *The only creatures prospering here.*

'If I'd known it was such a charming place,' observed Glokta, 'I'd have come sooner. Seems the Dagoskans have done well from joining the Union, eh?'

Harker did not recognise the irony. 'They have indeed. During the short time the Gurkish controlled the city, they took many of the leading citizens as slaves. Now, under the Union, they are truly free to work and live as they please.'

'Truly free, eh?' *So this is what freedom looks like.* Glokta watched a group of sullen natives crowding round a stall poorly stocked with half-rotten fruit and flyblown offal.

'Well, mostly.' Harker frowned. 'The Inquisition had to weed out a few troublemakers when we first arrived. Then, three years ago, the ungrateful swine mounted a rebellion.' *After we gave them the freedom to live like animals in their own city? Shocking.* 'We got the better of them, of course, but they caused no end of damage. After that they were barred from keeping weapons, or entering the Upper City, where most of the whites live. Since then, things have been quiet. It only goes to show that a firm hand is most effective when it comes to dealing with these primitives.'

'They built some impressive defences, for primitives.'

A high wall cut through the city before them, casting a long shadow over the squalid buildings of the slum. There was a wide pit in front, freshly dug and lined with sharpened stakes. A narrow bridge led across to a tall gate, set between looming towers. The heavy doors were open, but a dozen men stood before them: sweating Union soldiers in steel caps and studded leather coats, harsh sun glinting on their swords and spears.

'A well-guarded gate,' mused Vitari. 'Considering that it's inside the city.'

Harker frowned. 'Since the rebellion, natives have only been allowed within the Upper City if they have a permit.'

'And who holds a permit?' asked Glokta.

'Some skilled craftsmen and so forth, still employed by the Guild of Spicers, but mostly servants who work in the Upper City and the Citadel. Many of the Union citizens who live here have native servants, some have several.'

'Surely the natives are citizens of the Union also?'

Harker curled his lip. 'If you say so, Superior, but they can't be trusted, and that's a fact. They don't think like us.'

'Really?' *If they think at all it will be an improvement on this savage.*

'They're all scum, these browns. Gurmish, Dagoskan, all the same. Killers and thieves, the lot of them. Best thing to do is to push them down and keep them down.' Harker scowled out at the baking slum. 'If a thing smells like shit, and is the colour of shit, the chances are it is shit.' He turned and stalked off across the bridge.

'What a charming and enlightened man,' murmured Vitari. *You read my mind.*

It was a different world beyond the gates. Stately domes, elegant towers, mosaics of coloured glass and pillars of white marble shone in the blazing sun. The streets were wide and clean, the residences well maintained. There were even a few thirsty-looking palms in the neat squares. The people here were sleek, well dressed, and white-skinned. *Aside from a great deal of sunburn.* A few dark faces moved among them, keeping well out of the way, eyes on the ground. *Those lucky enough to be allowed to serve? They must be glad that we in the Union would not tolerate such a thing as slavery.*

Over everything Glokta could hear a rattling din, like a battle in the distance. It grew louder as he dragged his aching leg through the Upper City, and reached a furious pitch as they emerged into a wide square, packed from one edge to the other with a bewildering throng. There were people of Midderland, and Gurkhul, and Styria, narrow-eyed natives of Suljuk, yellow-haired citizens of the Old Empire, bearded Northmen even, far from home.

'Merchants,' grunted Harker. *All the merchants in the world, it looks like.* They

crowded round stalls laden with produce, great scales for the weighing of materials, blackboards with chalked-in goods and prices. They bellowed, borrowed and bartered in a multitude of different languages, threw up their hands in strange gestures, shoved and tugged and pointed at one another. They sniffed at boxes of spice and sticks of incense, fingered at bolts of cloth and planks of rare wood, squeezed at fruits, bit at coins, peered through eye-glasses at flashing gemstones. Here and there a native porter stumbled through the crowds, stooped double under a massive load.

'The Spicers take a cut of everything,' muttered Harker, shoving impatiently through the chattering press.

'That must be a great deal,' said Vitari under her breath. *A very great deal, I should imagine. Enough to defy the Gurmish. Enough to keep a whole city prisoner. People will kill for much, much less.*

Glokta grimaced and snarled his way across the square, jolted and barged and painfully shoved at every limping step. It was only when they finally emerged from the crowds at the far side that he realised they were standing in the very shadow of a vast and graceful building, rising arch upon arch, dome upon dome, high over the crowds. Delicate spires at each corner soared into the air, slender and frail.

'Magnificent,' muttered Glokta, stretching out his aching back and squinting up, the pure white stone almost painful to look at in the afternoon glare. 'Seeing this, one could almost believe in God.' *If one didn't know better.*

'Huh,' sneered Harker. 'The natives used to pray here in their thousands, poisoning the air with their damn chanting and superstition, until the rebellion was put down, of course.'

'And now?'

'Superior Davoust declared it off limits to them. Like everything else in the Upper City. Now the Spicers use it as an extension to the marketplace, buying and selling and so on.'

'Huh.' *How very appropriate. A temple to the making of money. Our own little religion.*

'I believe some bank uses part of it for their offices, as well.'

'A bank? Which one?'

'The Spicers run that side of things,' snapped Harker impatiently. 'Valint and something, is it?'

'Balk. Valint and Balk.' *So some old acquaintances are here before me, eh? I should have known. Those bastards are everywhere. Everywhere there's money. He peered round at the swarming marketplace. And there's a lot of money here.*

The way grew steeper as they began to climb the great rock, the streets built onto shelves cut out from the dry hillside. Glokta laboured on through the heat, stooped over his cane, biting his lip against the pain in his leg, thirsty as a dog and with sweat leaking out through every pore. Harker made no effort to slow as Glokta toiled along behind him. *And I'll be damned if I'm going to ask him to.*

'Above us is the Citadel.' The Inquisitor waved his hand at the mass of sheer-walled buildings, domes and towers clinging to the very top of the brown rock, high above the city. 'It was once the seat of the native King, but now it serves as Dagoska's administrative centre, and accommodates some of

the most important citizens. The Spicers' guildhall is inside, and the city's House of Questions.'

'Quite a view,' murmured Vitari.

Glokta turned and shaded his eyes with his hand. Dagoska was spread out before them, almost an island. The Upper City sloped away, neat grids of neat houses with long, straight roads in between, speckled with yellow palms and wide squares. On the far side of its long, curving wall lay the dusty brown jumble of the slums. Looming over them in the distance, shimmering in the haze, Glokta could see the mighty land walls, blocking the one narrow neck of rock that joined the city to the mainland, the blue sea on one side and the blue harbour on the other. *The strongest defences in the world, so they say. I wonder if we shall be putting that proud boast to the test before too long?*

'Superior Glokta?' Harker cleared his throat. 'The Lord Governor and his council will be waiting.'

'They can wait a little longer, then. I am curious to know what progress you have made in investigating the disappearance of Superior Davoust.' *It would be most unfortunate if the new Superior were to suffer the same fate, after all.*

Harker frowned. 'Well . . . some progress. I have no doubt the natives are responsible. They never stop plotting. Despite the measures Davoust took after the rebellion, many of them still refuse to learn their place.'

'I stand amazed.'

'It is all too true, believe me. Three Dagoskan servants were present in the Superior's chambers on the night he disappeared. I have been questioning them.'

'And what have you discovered?'

'Nothing yet, unfortunately. They have proved exceedingly stubborn.'

'Then let us question them together.'

'Together?' Harker licked his lips. 'I wasn't aware that you would want to question them yourself, Superior.'

'Now you are.'

One would have thought it would be cooler, deep within the rock. But it was every bit as hot as outside in the baking streets, without the mercy of the slightest breeze. The corridor was silent, dead, and stuffy as a tomb. Vitari's torch cast flickering shadows into the corners, and the darkness closed in fast behind them.

Harker paused beside an iron-bound door, mopped fat beads of sweat from his face. 'I must warn you, Superior, it was necessary to be quite . . . firm with them. A firm hand is the best thing, you know.'

'Oh, I can be quite firm myself, when the situation demands it. I am not easily shocked.'

'Good, good.' The key turned in the lock, the door swung open, and a foul smell washed out into the corridor. *A blocked latrine and a rotten rubbish heap rolled into one.* The cell beyond was tiny, windowless, the ceiling almost too low to stand. The heat was crushing, the stench was appalling. It reminded Glokta of another cell. Further south, in Shaffa. Deep beneath the Emperor's palace. *A cell in which I gasped away two years, squealing in the blackness,*

scratching at the walls, crawling in my own filth. His eye had begun to twitch, and he wiped it carefully with his finger.

One prisoner lay stretched out, his face to the wall, skin black with bruises, both legs broken. Another hung from the ceiling by his wrists, knees brushing the floor, head hanging limp, back whipped raw. Vitari stooped and prodded at one of them with her finger. 'Dead,' she said simply. She crossed to the other. 'And this one. Dead a good while.'

The flickering light fell across a third prisoner. This one was alive. *Just.* She was chained by hands and feet, face hollow with hunger, lips cracked with thirst, clutching filthy, bloodstained rags to her. Her heels scraped at the floor as she tried to push herself further back into the corner, gibbering faintly in Kantic, one hand across her face to ward off the light. *I remember. The only thing worse than the darkness is when the light comes. The questions always come with it.*

Glokta frowned, his twitching eyes moving from the two broken corpses to the cowering girl, his head spinning from the effort, and the heat, and the stink. 'Well this is very cosy. What have they told you?'

Harker had his hand over his nose and mouth as he stepped reluctantly into the cell, Frost looming just over his shoulder. 'Nothing yet, but I—'

'You'll get nothing from these two, now, that's sure. I hope they signed confessions.'

'Well . . . not exactly. Superior Davoust was never that interested in confessions from the browns, we just, you know . . .'

'You couldn't even keep them alive long enough to confess?'

Harker looked sullen. *Like a child unfairly punished by his schoolmaster.* 'There's still the girl,' he snapped.

Glokta looked down at her, licking at the space where his front teeth used to be. *There is no method here. No purpose. Brutality, for its own sake. I might almost be sickened, had I eaten anything today.* 'How old is she?'

'Fourteen, perhaps, Superior, but I fail to see the relevance.'

'The relevance, Inquisitor Harker, is that conspiracies are rarely led by fourteen-year-old girls.'

'I thought it best to be thorough.'

'Thorough? Did you even ask them any questions?'

'Well, I—'

Glokta's cane cracked Harker cleanly across the face. The sudden movement caused a stab of agony in Glokta's side, and he stumbled on his weak leg and had to grab at Frost's arm for support. The Inquisitor gave a squeal of pain and shock, tumbled against the wall and slid into the filth on the cell floor.

'You're not an Inquisitor!' hissed Glokta, 'you're a fucking butcher! Look at the state of this place! And you've killed two of our witnesses! What use are they now, fool?' Glokta leaned forward. 'Unless that was your intention, eh? Perhaps Davoust was killed by a jealous underling? An underling who wanted to silence the witnesses, eh, Harker? Perhaps I should start my investigations with the Inquisition itself!'

Practical Frost loomed over Harker as he struggled to get up, and he shrank back down against the wall, blood starting to dribble from his nose. 'No! No, please! It was an accident! I didn't mean to kill them! I just wanted to know

what happened!’

‘An accident? You’re a traitor or an utter incompetent, and I’ve no use for either one!’ He leaned down even lower, ignoring the pain shooting up his back, his lips curling away to show his toothless smile. ‘I understand a firm hand is most effective when dealing with primitives, Inquisitor. You will find there are no firmer hands than mine. Not anywhere. Get this worm out of my sight!’

Frost seized hold of Harker by his coat and hauled him bodily through the filth towards the door. ‘Wait!’ he wailed, clutching at the door frame, ‘please! You can’t do this!’ His cries faded down the corridor.

Vitari had a faint smile around her eyes, as though she had rather enjoyed the scene. ‘What about this mess?’

‘Get it cleaned up.’ Glokta leaned against the wall, his side still pulsing with pain, wiped sweat from his face with a trembling hand. ‘Wash it down. Bury these bodies.’

Vitari nodded towards the one survivor. ‘What about her?’

‘Give her a bath. Clothes. Food. Let her go.’

‘Hardly worth giving her a bath if she’s going back to the Lower City.’

She has a point there. ‘Alright! She was Davoust’s servant, she can be mine. Put her back to work!’ he shouted over his shoulder, already hobbling for the door. He had to get out. He could hardly breathe in there.

‘I am sorry to disappoint you all, but the walls are far from impregnable, not in their present poor condition . . .’ The speaker trailed off as Glokta shuffled through the door into the meeting chamber of Dagoska’s ruling council.

It was as unlike the cell below as it was possible for a room to be. *It is, in fact, the most beautiful room I ever saw.* Every inch of wall and ceiling was carved in the most minute detail: geometric patterns of frightening intricacy wound round scenes from Kantic legends in life-size, all painted in glittering gold and silver, vivid red and blue. The floor was a mosaic of wondrous complexity, the long table was inlaid with swirls of dark wood and chips of bright ivory, polished to a high sheen. The tall windows offered a spectacular view over the dusty brown expanse of the city, and the sparkling bay beyond.

The woman who rose to greet Glokta as he entered did not seem out of place in the magnificent surroundings. *Not in the slightest.*

‘I am Carlot dan Eider,’ she said, smiling easily and holding her hands out to him as though to an old friend, ‘Magister of the Guild of Spicers.’

Glokta was impressed, he had to admit. *If only by her stomach. Not even the slightest sign of horror. She greets me as though I were not a disfigured, twitching, twisted ruin. She greets me as though I looked as fine as she does.* She wore a long gown in the style of the South: blue silk, trimmed with silver, it shimmered around her in the cool breeze through the high windows. Jewels of daunting value flashed on her fingers, on her wrists, round her throat. Glokta detected a strange scent as she came closer. *Sweet. Like the spice that has made her so very rich, perhaps.* The effect was far from wasted on him. *I am still a man, after all. Just less so than I used to be.*

‘I must apologise for my attire, but Kantic garments are so much more

comfortable in the heat. I have become quite accustomed to them during my years here.'

Her apologising for her appearance is like a genius apologising for his stupidity. 'Don't mention it.' Glokta bowed as low as he could, given the uselessness of his leg and the sharp pain in his back. 'Superior Glokta, at your service.'

'We are most glad to have you with us. We have all been greatly concerned since the disappearance of your predecessor, Superior Davoust.' *Some of you, I expect, have been less concerned than others.*

'I hope to shed some light on the matter.'

'We all hope that you will.' She took Glokta's elbow with an effortless confidence. 'Please allow me to make the introductions.'

Glokta refused to be moved. 'Thank you, Magister, but I believe I can make my own.' He shuffled across to the table under his own power, such as it was. 'You must be General Vissbruck, charged with the city's defence.' The General was in his middle forties, running slightly to baldness, sweating abundantly in an elaborate uniform, buttoned all the way to the neck in spite of the heat. *I remember you. You were in Gurkhul, in the war. A Major in the King's Own, and well known for being an ass. It seems you have done well, at least, as asses generally do.*

'A pleasure,' said Vissbruck, scarcely even glancing up from his documents.

'It always is, to renew an old acquaintance.'

'We've met?'

'We fought together in Gurkhul.'

'We did?' A spasm of shock ran over Vissbruck's sweaty face. 'You're . . . *that* Glokta?'

'I am indeed, as you say, *that* Glokta.'

The General blinked. 'Er, well, er . . . how have you been?'

'In very great pain, thank you for asking, but I see that you have prospered, and that is a tremendous consolation.' Vissbruck blinked, but Glokta did not give him time to reply. 'And this must be Lord Governor Vurms. A positive honour, your Grace.'

The old man was a caricature of decrepitude, shrunken into his great robes of state like a withered plum in its furry skin. His hands seemed to shiver even in the heat, his head was shiny bald aside from a few white wisps. He squinted up at Glokta through weak and rheumy eyes.

'What did he say?' The Lord Governor stared about him in confusion. 'Who is this man?'

General Vissbruck leaned across, so close his lips almost brushed the old man's ear. 'Superior Glokta, your Grace! The replacement for Davoust!'

'Glokta? Glokta? Where the hell is Davoust anyway?' No one bothered to reply.

'I am Korsten dan Vurms.' The Lord Governor's son spoke his own name as though it was a magic spell, offered his hand to Glokta as though it was a priceless gift. He was blond-haired and handsome, spread out carelessly in his chair, a well-tanned glow of health about him, as lithe and athletic as his father was ancient and wizened. *I despise him already.*

'I understand that you were once quite the swordsman.' Vurms looked Glokta up and down with a mocking smile. 'I fence myself, and there's really

no one here to challenge me. Perhaps we might have a bout?' *I'd love to, you little bastard. If I still had my leg I'd give you a bout of the shits before I was done.*

'I did fence but, alas, I had to give it up. Ill health.' Glokta leered back a toothless smile of his own. 'I daresay I could still give you a few pointers, though, if you're keen to improve.' Vurms frowned at that, but Glokta had already moved on. 'You must be Haddish Kahdia.'

The Haddish was a tall, slender man with a long neck and tired eyes. He wore a simple white robe, a plain white turban wound about his head. *He looks no more prosperous than any of the other natives down in the Lower City, and yet there is a certain dignity about him.*

'I am Kahdia, and I have been chosen by the people of Dagoska to speak for them. But I no longer call myself Haddish. A priest without a temple is no priest at all.'

'Must we still hear about the temple?' whined Vurms.

'I am afraid you must, while I sit on this council.' He looked back at Glokta. 'So there is a new Inquisitor in the city? A new devil. A new bringer of death. Your comings and goings are of no interest to me, torturer.'

Glokta smiled. *Confessing his hatred for the Inquisition without even seeing my instruments. But then his people can hardly be expected to have much love for the Union, they're little better than slaves in their own city. Could he be our traitor?*

Or him? General Vissbruck seemed every inch a loyal military man, a man whose sense of duty was too strong, and whose imagination was too weak, for intrigue. *But few men become Generals without looking to their own profit, without oiling the wheels, without keeping some secrets.*

Or him? Korsten dan Vurms was sneering at Glokta as though at a badly-cleaned latrine he had to use. *I've seen his like a thousand times, the arrogant whelp. The Lord Governor's own son, perhaps, but it's plain enough he has no loyalty to anyone beyond himself.*

Or her? Magister Eider was all comely smiles and politeness, but her eyes were hard as diamonds. *Judging me like a merchant judges an ignorant customer. There's more to her than fine manners and a weakness for foreign tailoring. Far more.*

Or him? Even the old Lord Governor seemed suspect now. *Are his eyes and ears as bad as he claims? Or is there a hint of play-acting in his squinting, his demands to know what's going on? Does he already know more than anyone?*

Glokta turned and limped towards the window, leaned against the beautifully carved pillar beside it and peered out at the astonishing view, the evening sun still warm on his face. He could already feel the council members shifting restlessly, keen to be rid of him. *I wonder how long before they order the cripple out of their beautiful room? I do not trust a one of them. Not a one. He smirked to himself. Precisely as it should be.*

It was Korsten dan Vurms who lost patience first. 'Superior Glokta,' he snapped. 'We appreciate your thoroughness in presenting yourself here, but I am sure you have urgent business to attend to. We certainly do.'

'Of course.' Glokta hobbled back to the table with exaggerated slowness as if he were leaving the room. Then he slid out a chair and lowered himself into it, wincing at the pain in his leg. 'I will try to keep my comments to a minimum, at least to begin with.'

‘What?’ said Vissbruck.

‘Who is this fellow?’ demanded the Lord Governor, craning forwards and squinting with his weak eyes. ‘What is going on here?’

His son was more direct. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ he demanded. ‘Are you mad?’ Haddish Kahdia began to chuckle softly to himself. At Glokta, or at the rage of the others, it was impossible to say.

‘Please, gentlemen, please.’ Magister Eider spoke softly, patiently. ‘The Superior has only just arrived, and is perhaps ignorant of how we conduct business in Dagoska. You must understand that your predecessor did not attend these meetings. We have been governing this city successfully for several years, and—’

‘The Closed Council disagrees.’ Glokta held up the King’s writ between two fingers. He let everyone look at it for a moment, making sure they could see the heavy seal of red and gold, then he flicked it across the table.

The others stared over suspiciously as Carlot dan Eider picked up the document, unfolded it and started to read. She frowned, then raised one well-plucked eyebrow. ‘It seems that we are the ignorant ones.’

‘Let me see that!’ Korsten dan Vurms snatched the paper out of her hands and started to read it. ‘It can’t be,’ he muttered. ‘It can’t be!’

‘I’m afraid that it is.’ Glokta treated the assembly to his toothless leer. ‘Arch Lector Sult is most concerned. He has asked me to look into the disappearance of Superior Davoust, and also to examine the city’s defences. To examine them carefully, and to ensure that the Gurkish stay on the other side of them. He has instructed me to use whatever measures I deem necessary.’ He gave a significant pause. ‘Whatever . . . measures.’

‘What is that?’ grumbled the Lord Governor. ‘I demand to know what is going on!’

Vissbruck had the paper now. ‘The King’s writ,’ he breathed, mopping his sweaty forehead on the back of his sleeve, ‘signed by all twelve chairs on the Closed Council. It grants full powers!’ He laid it down gently on the inlaid table-top, as though worried it might suddenly burst into flames. ‘This is—’

‘We all know what it is.’ Magister Eider was watching Glokta thoughtfully, one fingertip stroking her smooth cheek. *Like a merchant who suddenly becomes aware that her supposedly ignorant customer has fleeced her, and not the other way around.* ‘It seems Superior Glokta will be taking charge.’

‘I would hardly say taking charge, but I will be attending all further meetings of this council. You should consider that the first of a very great number of changes.’ Glokta gave a comfortable sigh as he settled into his beautiful chair, stretching out his aching leg, resting his aching back. Almost comfortable. He glanced across the frowning faces of the city’s ruling council. *Except, of course, that one of these charming people is most likely a dangerous traitor. A traitor who has already arranged the disappearance of one Superior, and may very well now be considering the removal of a second . . .*

Glokta cleared his throat. ‘Now then, General Vissbruck, what were you saying as I arrived? Something about the walls?’

The Wounds of the Past

‘The mistakes of old,’ intoned Bayaz with the highest pomposity, ‘should be made only once. Any worthwhile T education, therefore, must be founded on a sound understanding of history.’

Jezal gave vent to a ragged sigh. Why on earth the old man had undertaken to enlighten him was past his understanding. The towering self-interest, perhaps, of the mildly senile was to blame. In any case, Jezal was unshakable in his determination not to learn a thing.

‘. . . yes, history,’ the Magus was musing, ‘there is a lot of history in Calcis . . .’

Jezal glanced around him, unimpressed in the extreme. If history was nothing more than age, then Calcis, ancient city-port of the Old Empire, was plainly rich with it. If history went further – to grandeur, to glory, to something which stirred the blood – then it was conspicuously absent.

Doubtless the city had been carefully laid out, with wide, straight streets positioned to give the traveller magnificent views. But what might once have been proud civic vistas, the long centuries had reduced to panoramas of decay. Everywhere there were abandoned houses, empty windows and doorways gazing sadly out into the rutted squares. They passed side-streets choked with weeds, with rubble, with rotting timbers. Half the bridges across the sluggish river had collapsed and never been repaired; half the trees in the broad avenues were dead and withered, throttled by ivy.

There was none of the sheer life that crammed Adua, from the docks, to the slums, to the Agriont itself. Jezal’s home might have sometimes seemed swarming, squabbling, bursting at the seams with humanity, but, as he watched the few threadbare citizens of Calcis traipsing through their rotting relic of a city, he was in no doubt which atmosphere he preferred.

‘. . . you will have many opportunities to improve yourself on this journey of ours, my young friend, and I suggest you take advantage of them. Master Ninefingers in particular, is well worthy of study. I feel you could learn a great deal from him . . .’

Jezal almost gasped with disbelief. ‘From that ape?’

‘That ape, as you say, is famous throughout the North. The Bloody-Nine, they call him there. A name to fill strong men with fear or courage, depending on which side they stand. A fighter and tactician of deep cunning and matchless experience. Above all, he has learned the trick of saying a great deal less than he knows.’ Bayaz glanced across at him. ‘The precise opposite of some people I could name.’

Jezal frowned and hunched his shoulders. He could see nothing to be learned from Ninefingers apart, perhaps, from how to eat with one’s hands and go days without washing.

‘The great forum,’ muttered Bayaz, as they passed into a wide, open space.

'The throbbing heart of the city.' Even he sounded disappointed. 'Here the citizens of Calcis would come to buy and sell, to watch spectacles and hear cases at law, to argue philosophy and politics. In the Old Time it would have been crammed shoulder to shoulder here, until late in the evening.'

There was ample space now. The vast paved area could easily have accommodated fifty times the sorry crowd that was gathered there. The grand statues round the edge were stained and broken, their dirty pedestals leaning at all angles. A few desultory stalls were laid out in the centre, crowded together like sheep in cold weather.

'A shadow of its former glory. Still,' and Bayaz pointed out the dishevelled sculptures, 'these are the only occupants that need interest us today.'

'Really, and they are?'

'Emperors of the distant past, my boy, each with a tale to tell.'

Jezal groaned inwardly. He had nothing more than a passing interest in the history of his own country, let alone that of some decaying backwater in the far-flung west of the World. 'There's a lot of them,' he muttered.

'And these are by no means all. The history of the Old Empire stretches back for many centuries.'

'Must be why they call it old.'

'Don't try to be clever with me, Captain Luthar, you have not the equipment. While your forebears in the Union were running around naked, communicating by gestures and worshipping mud, here my master Juvens was guiding the birth of a mighty nation, a nation that in scale and wealth, in knowledge and grandeur, has never been equalled. Adua, Talins, Shaffa, they are but shadows of the wondrous cities that once thrived in the valley of the great river Aos. This is the cradle of civilisation, my young friend.'

Jezal glanced round him at the sorry statues, the rotting trees, the grimy, the forlorn, the faded streets. 'What went wrong?'

'The failure of something great is never a simple matter, but, where there is success and glory, there must also be failure and shame. Where there are both, jealousies must simmer. Envy and pride led by slow degrees to squabbles, then to feuds, then to wars. Two great wars that ended in terrible disasters.' He stepped smartly towards the nearest of the statues. 'But disasters are not without their lessons, my boy.'

Jezal grimaced. He needed more lessons like he needed a dose of the cock-rot, and he in no sense felt himself to be anyone's boy, but the old man was not in the least put off by his reluctance.

'A great ruler must be ruthless,' intoned Bayaz. 'When he perceives a threat against his person or authority, he must move swiftly, and with no space left for regret. For an example, we need look no further than the Emperor Shilla.' He gazed up at the marble above them, its features all but entirely worn away by the weather. 'When he suspected his chamberlain of harbouring pretensions to the throne, he ordered him put to death on the instant, his wife and all his children strangled, his great mansion in Aulcus levelled to the ground.' Bayaz shrugged. 'All without the slightest shred of proof. An excessive and a brutal act, but better to act with too much force than too little. Better to be held in fear, than in contempt. Shilla knew this. There is no place for sentiment in politics, do you see?'

'I see that wherever I turn in life there's always some fucking old dunce trying to give me a lecture.' That was what Jezal thought, but he was not about to say it. The memory of a Practical of the Inquisition bursting apart before his very eyes was still horribly fresh in his mind. The squelching sound of the flesh. The feeling of spots of hot blood pattering across his face. He swallowed and looked down at his shoes.

'I see,' he muttered.

Bayaz' voice droned on. 'Not that a great King need be a tyrant, of course! To gain the love of the common man should always be a ruler's first aim, for it can be won with small gestures, and yet can last a lifetime.'

Jezal was not about to let that pass, however dangerous the old man might be. It was clear that Bayaz had no practical experience in the arena of politics. 'What use is the love of commoners? The nobles have the money, the soldiers, the power.'

Bayaz rolled his eyes at the clouds. 'The words of a child, easily tricked by flim-flam and quick hands. Where does the nobles' money come from, but from taxes on the peasants in the fields? Who are their soldiers, but the sons and husbands of common folk? What gives the lords their power? Only the compliance of their vassals, nothing more. When the peasantry become truly dissatisfied, that power can vanish with terrifying speed. Take the case of the Emperor Dantus.' He gestured up at one of the many statues, one arm broken off at the shoulder, the other holding out a handful of scum in which a rich bloom of moss had taken hold. The loss of his nose, leaving a grimy crater, had left the Emperor Dantus with an expression of eternal embarrassed bewilderment, like a man surprised whilst on the latrine.

'No ruler has ever been more loved by his people,' said Bayaz. 'He greeted every man as his equal, always gave half his revenues to the poor. But the nobles conspired against him, fixed on one of their number to replace him, and threw the Emperor into prison while they seized the throne.'

'Did they really?' grunted Jezal, staring off across the half-empty square.

'But the people would not abandon their beloved monarch. They rose from their homes and rioted, and would not be subdued. Some of the conspirators were dragged from their palaces and hung in the streets, the others were cowed, and returned Dantus to his throne. So you see, my lad, that the love of the people is a ruler's surest shield against danger.'

Jezal sighed. 'Give me the support of the lords every time.'

'Hah. Their love is costly, and fickle as the changing wind. Have you not stood in the Lords' Round, Captain Luthar, while the Open Council is in session?' Jezal frowned. Perhaps there was some grain of truth in the old man's babble. 'Hah. Such is the love of nobles. The best that one can do is to divide them and work on their jealousies, make them compete for small favours, claim the credit for their successes, and most of all ensure that no one of them should grow too powerful, and rise to challenge one's own majesty.'

'Who is this?' One statue stood noticeably higher than the others. An impressive-seeming man in late middle-age with a thick beard and curling hair. His face was handsome but there was a grim set to his mouth, a proud and wrathful wrinkling of his brow. A man not to be fooled with.

'That is my master, Juvens. Not an Emperor, but the first and last adviser to

many. He built the Empire, yet he was also the principal in its destruction. A great man, in so many ways, but great men have great faults.' Bayaz turned his worn staff thoughtfully round in his hand. 'One should learn the lessons of history. The mistakes of the past need only be made once.' He paused for a moment. 'Unless there are no other choices.'

Jeza! rubbed his eyes and stared across the forum. The Crown Prince Ladisla, perhaps, might have benefited from such a lecture, but Jeza! rather doubted it. Was this why he had been torn away from his friends, from his hard-earned chance at glory and advancement? To listen to the dusty musings of some strange, bald wanderer?

He frowned. There were a group of three soldiers moving towards them across the square. At first he watched them, uninterested. Then he realised they were looking right at him and Bayaz, and moving directly towards them. Now he saw another group of three, and another, coming from different directions.

Jeza!'s throat felt tight. Their armour and weapons, though of an antique design, looked worryingly effective and well-used. Fencing was one thing. Actual fighting, with its possibilities for serious wounding and death, was quite another. It was not cowardice, surely, to feel worried, not with nine armed men very clearly approaching them, and no possible route of escape.

Bayaz had noticed them too. 'A welcome appears to have been prepared.'

The nine closed in, faces hard, weapons firmly gripped. Jeza! squared his shoulders and did his best to look fearsome while meeting nobody's eye, and keeping his hands well away from the hilts of his steels. He had no wish whatsoever for someone to get nervous, and stab him on a whim.

'You are Bayaz,' said their leader, a heavy-set man with a grubby red plume on his helmet.

'Is that a question?'

'No. Our master, the Imperial Legate, Salamo Narba, governor of Calcis, invites you to an audience.'

'Does he indeed?' Bayaz glanced around at the party of soldiers, then raised an eyebrow at Jeza!. 'I suppose it would be rude of us to refuse, when the Legate has gone to all the trouble of organising an honour guard. Lead the way.'

Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's in pain. He dragged himself over the broken cobblestones, wincing every time his weight went onto his bad ankle – limping, gasping, waving his arms to keep his balance.

Brother Longfoot grinned over his shoulder at this sorry display. 'How are your injuries progressing, my friend?'

'Painfully,' grunted Logen, through gritted teeth.

'And yet, I suspect, you have endured worse.'

'Huh.' The wounds of the past were many. He'd spent most of his life in some amount of pain, healing too slowly from one beating or another. He remembered the first real wound he'd ever taken, a cut down his face that the Shanka had given him. Fifteen years old, lean and smooth-skinned and the girls in the village had still liked to look at him. He touched his thumb to his

face and felt the old scar. He remembered his father pressing the bandage to his cheek in the smoky hall, the stinging of it, wanting to shout but biting his lip. A man stays silent.

When he can. Logen remembered lying on his face in a stinking tent with the cold rain drumming on the canvas, biting on a piece of leather to keep from screaming, coughing it out and screaming anyway while they dug in his back for an arrow-head that hadn't come out with the shaft. It had taken them a day of looking to find the bastard thing. Logen winced and wriggled his tingling shoulder blades at that memory. He hadn't been able to talk for a week from all that screaming.

Hadn't been able to talk for more than a week after the duel with Threetrees. Or walk, or eat, or see hardly. Broken jaw, broken cheek, ribs broken past counting. Bones smashed until he was no more than aching, crying, self-pitying goo, mewling like an infant at every movement of his stretcher, fed by an old woman with a spoon and grateful to get it.

There were plenty more memories, all crowding in and cutting at him. The stump of his finger after the battle at Carleon, burning and burning and making him crazy. Waking up sudden after a day out cold, when he got knocked on the head up in the hills. Pissing red after Harding Grim's spear had pricked him through the guts. Logen felt them now on his tattered skin, all of his scars, and he hugged his arms around his aching body.

The wounds of the past were many, alright, but it didn't make the ones he had now hurt any less. The cut in his shoulder nagged at him, sore as a burning coal. He'd seen a man lose an arm from nothing more than a graze he'd got in battle. First they had to take off his hand, then his arm to the elbow, then all the way to the shoulder. Next he got tired, then he started talking stupid, then he stopped breathing. Logen didn't want to go back to the mud that way.

He hopped up to a crumbling stump of wall and leaned against it, painfully shrugged his coat off, fumbled at the buttons of his shirt with one clumsy hand, pulled the pin out of the bandage and peeled the dressing carefully away.

'How does it look?' he asked.

'Like the parent of all scabs,' muttered Longfoot, peering at his shoulder.

'Does it smell alright?'

'You want me to smell you?'

'Just tell me if it stinks.'

The Navigator leaned forwards and sniffed daintily at Logen's shoulder. 'A marked odour of sweat, but that might be your armpit. I fear that my remarkable talents do not encompass medicine. One wound smells much like another to me.' And he pushed the pin back through the bandage.

Logen worked his shirt on. 'You'd know if it was rotten, believe me. Reeks like old graves, and once the rot gets in you there's no getting rid of it but with a blade. Bad way to go.' And he shuddered and pressed his palm gently against his throbbing shoulder.

'Yes, well,' said Longfoot, already striding off down the near-deserted street. 'Lucky for you that we have the woman Maljinn with us. Her talent for conversation is most extremely limited, but when it comes to wounds, well, I

saw the whole business and don't object to telling you, she can stitch skin as calm and even as a master cobbler stitches leather. She can indeed! She pulls a needle as nimble and neat as a queen's dressmaker. A useful talent to have in these parts. I would not be the least surprised if we need that talent again before we're done.'

'It's a dangerous journey?' asked Logen, still trying to struggle back into his coat.

'Huh. The North has always been wild and lawless, heavy with bloody feuds and merciless brigands. Every man goes armed to the teeth, and ready to kill at a moment's notice. In Gurkhul foreign travellers stay free only on the whim of the local governor, at risk of being taken as a slave at any moment. Styrian cities sport thugs and cutpurses on every corner, if you can even get through their gates without being robbed by the authorities. The waters of the Thousand Isles are thick with pirates, one for each merchant, it sometimes seems, while in distant Suljuk they fear and despise outsiders, and likely as not will hang you by your feet and cut your throat as soon as give you directions. The Circle of the World is full of dangers, my nine-fingered friend, but if all that is not enough for you, and you yearn for more severe peril, I suggest that you visit the Old Empire.'

Logen got the feeling that Brother Longfoot was enjoying himself. 'That bad?'

'Worse, oh yes, indeed! Especially if, rather than simply visiting, one undertakes to cross the breadth of the country from one side to the other.'

Logen winced. 'And that's the plan?'

'That is, as you put it, the plan. For time out of mind, the Old Empire has been riven by civil strife. Once a single nation with a single Emperor, his laws enforced by a mighty army and a loyal administration, it has dissolved down the years into a boiling soup of petty principedoms, crackpot republics, city states and tiny lordships, until few acknowledge any leader who does not even now hold a sword over their heads. The lines between tax and brigandage, between just war and bloody murder, between rightful claim and fantasy have blurred and vanished. Hardly a year goes by without another power-hungry bandit declaring himself king of the world. I understand there was a time, perhaps fifty years ago, when there were no fewer than sixteen Emperors at one moment.'

'Huh. Fifteen more than you need.'

'Sixteen more, some might say, and not a one of them friendly to travellers. When it comes to getting murdered, the Old Empire presents a victim with quite the dazzling choice. But one need not be killed by men.'

'No?'

'Oh, dear me, no! Nature has also placed many fearsome obstacles in our path, especially given that winter is now coming fast upon us. Westward of Calcis stretches a wide and level plain, open grassland for many hundreds of miles. In the Old Time, perhaps, much of it was settled, cultivated, crossed by straight roads of good stone in every direction. Now the towns mostly lie in silent ruins, the land is storm-drenched wilderness, the roads are trails of broken stones luring the unwary into sucking bogs.'

'Bogs,' muttered Logen, slowly shaking his head.

‘And worse beside. The river Aos, greatest of all rivers within the Circle of the World, carves a deep and snaking valley through the midst of this wasteland. We will have to cross it, but there are only two surviving bridges, one at Darmium, which is our best chance, another at Aostum, a hundred miles or more further west. There are fords, but the Aos is mighty, and fast-flowing, and the valley deep and dangerous.’ Longfoot clicked his tongue. ‘That is before we reach the Broken Mountains.’

‘High, are they?’

‘Oh, extremely. Very high, and very perilous. Called Broken for their steep cliffs, their jagged ravines, their sudden plunging drops. There are rumoured to be passes, but all the maps, if indeed there ever were any, were lost long ago. Having negotiated the mountains we will take ship—’

‘You plan to carry a ship over the mountains?’

‘Our employer assures me he can get one on the other side, though how I do not know, for that land is almost utterly unknown. We will sail due west to the island of Shabulyan, which they say rises from the ocean at the very edge of the World.’

‘They say?’

‘Rumour is all that anyone knows of it. Even amongst the illustrious order of Navigators, I have heard of no man who lays claim to have set foot upon the place, and the brothers of my order are well known for . . . far-fetched claims, shall we say?’

Logen scratched slowly at his face, wishing that he’d asked Bayaz his plans before. ‘It all sounds a long way.’

‘One could scarcely conceive, in fact, of a destination more remote.’

‘What’s there?’

Longfoot shrugged. ‘You will have to ask our employer. I find routes, not reasons. Follow me please, Master Ninefingers, and I pray you not to dally. We have a great deal to do if we are to pose as merchants.’

‘Merchants?’

‘That is Bayaz’ plan. Merchants often risk the journey west from Calcis to Darmium, even beyond to Aostum. They are large cities still, and largely cut off from the outside world. The profits one can make carrying foreign luxuries to them – spices from Gurkhul, silks from Suljuk, chagga from the North – are astronomical. Why, you can triple your investment in a month, if you survive! Such caravans are a common sight, well armed and well defended, of course.’

‘What about these looters and robbers wandering the plain? Aren’t merchants just what they’re after?’

‘Of course,’ said Longfoot. ‘It must be some other threat that this disguise is intended to defend against. One directed specifically at us.’

‘At us? Another threat? We need more?’ But Longfoot was already striding out of earshot.

In one part of Calcis at least, the majesty of the past was not entirely faded. The hall into which they were ushered by their guards, or their kidnappers, was glorious indeed.

Two lines of columns, tall as forest trees, marched down either side of the

echoing space, carved from polished green stone fretted with glittering veins of silver. High above, the ceiling was painted a rich blue-black, marked with a galaxy of shining stars, constellations picked out by golden lines. A deep pool of dark water filled the space before the door, perfectly still, reflecting everything. Another shadowy hall below. Another shadowy night sky beyond it.

The Imperial Legate lay sprawled out across a couch on a high dais at the far end of the room, a table before him loaded with delicacies. He was a huge man, round-faced and fleshy. Fingers heavy with golden rings snatched up choice morsels and tossed them into his waiting mouth, eyes never leaving his two guests, or his two prisoners, for a moment.

'I am Salamo Narba, Imperial Legate and governor of the city of Calcis.' He worked his mouth, then spat out an olive stone which pinged into a dish. 'You are the one they call the First of the Magi?'

The Magus inclined his bald head. Narba lifted up a goblet, holding the stem between his heavy forefinger and his heavy thumb, took a swig of wine, sloshed it slowly round in his mouth while he watched them, and swallowed. 'Bayaz.'

'The same.'

'Hmm. I mean no offence.' Here the Legate snatched up a tiny fork and speared an oyster from its shell, 'but your presence in this city concerns me. The political situation in the Empire is . . . volatile.' He picked up his goblet. 'Even more so than usual.' Swig, slosh, swallow. 'The last thing that I need is someone . . . upsetting the balance.'

'More volatile than usual?' asked Bayaz. 'I understood that Sabarbus had finally calmed things.'

'Calmed them under his boot, for a while.' The Legate tore a handful of dark grapes from a bunch and leaned back on his cushions, popping them one by one into his gaping mouth. 'But Sabarbus . . . is dead. Poison, they say. His sons, Scario . . . and Goltus . . . squabbled over his legacy . . . then made war on each other. An exceptionally bloody war, even for this exhausted land.' And he spat the pips out onto the table top.

'Goltus held the city of Darmium, in the midst of the great plain. Scario employed his father's greatest general, Cabrian, to take it under siege. Not long ago, after five months of encirclement, starved of provisions, hopeless of relief . . . the city surrendered.' Narba bit into a ripe plum, juice running down his chin.

'So Scario is close to victory, then.'

'Huh.' The Legate wiped his face with the tip of his little finger and tossed the unfinished fruit carelessly onto the table. 'No sooner had Cabrian finally taken the city, pillaged its treasures and given it over to a brutal sack by his soldiers, than he installed himself in the ancient palace and proclaimed himself Emperor.'

'Ah. You seem unmoved.'

'I weep on the inside, but I have seen all this before. Scario, Goltus, and now Cabrian. Three self-appointed Emperors, locked in a deadly struggle, their soldiers ravaging the land, while the few cities who have maintained their independence look on, horrified, and do their best to escape the nightmare

unscathed.'

Bayaz frowned. 'I mean to travel westward. I must cross the Aos, and Darmium is the closest bridge.'

The Legate shook his head. 'It is said that Cabrian, always eccentric, has lost his reason entirely. That he has murdered his wife and married his own three daughters. That he has declared himself a living god. The city gates are sealed while he scour the city for witches, devils, and traitors. Every day there are new bodies hanging at the public gibbets he has raised on each corner. No one is permitted either to enter or to leave. Such is the news from Darmium.'

Jeza! was more than a little relieved to hear Bayaz say, 'it must be Aostum, then.'

'Nobody will be crossing the river at Aostum any longer. Scario, running from his brother's vengeful armies, fled across the bridge and had his engineers bring it down behind him.'

'He destroyed it?'

'He did. A wonder of the Old Time which stood for two thousand years. Nothing remains. To add to your woes, there have been heavy rains and the great river runs swift and high. The fords are impassable. You will not cross the Aos this year, I fear.'

'I must.'

'But you will not. If you wish for my advice, I would leave the Empire to its misery and return from whence you came. Here in Calcis we have always tried to plough a middle furrow, to remain neutral, and firmly aloof from the disasters that have befallen the rest of the land, one hard upon another. Here we still cling to the ways of our forefathers.' He gestured at himself. 'The city is yet governed by an Imperial Legate, as it was in the Old Time, not ruled by some brigand, some petty chieftain, some false Emperor.' He waved a limp hand at the rich hall around them. 'Here, against the odds, we have managed to retain some vestige of the glory of old, and I will not risk that. Your friend Zacharus was here, not but a month ago.'

'Here?'

'He told me that Goltus was the rightful Emperor and demanded that I throw my support behind him. I sent him scurrying away with the same answer I will give to you. We in Calcis are happy as we are. We want no part of your self-serving schemes. Take your meddling and get you gone, Magus. I give you three days to leave the city.'

There was a long, quiet pause as the last echoes of Narba's speech faded. A long, breathless moment, and all the while Bayaz' frown grew harder. A long, expectant silence, but not quite empty. It was full of growing fear.

'Have you confused me with some other man?' growled Bayaz, and Jeza! felt an urgent need to shuffle away from him and hide behind one of the beautiful pillars. 'I am the First of the Magi! The first apprentice of great Juvens himself!' His anger was like a great stone pressing on Jeza!'s chest, squeezing the air from his lungs, crushing the strength from his body. He held up his meaty fist. 'This is the hand that cast down Kanedias! The hand that crowned Harod! You dare to give me threats? Is this what you call the glory of old? A city shrunken in its crumbling walls like some withered old warrior cowering in the outsize armour of his youth?' Narba shrank behind his silverware and

Jezal winced, terrified that the Legate might explode at any moment and shower the room with gore.

‘You think I care a damn for your broken piss-pot of a town?’ thundered Bayaz. ‘You give me three days? I’ll be gone in one!’ And he turned on his heel and stalked across the polished floor towards the entrance, the ringing echoes of his voice still grating from the shining walls, the glittering ceiling.

Jezal dithered a moment, weak and trembling, then shuffled guiltily away, following the First of the Magi past the Legate’s horrified, dumbstruck guards and out into the daylight.

The Condition of the Defences

To Arch Lector Sult,

head of his Majesty's Inquisition.

Your Eminence,

I have acquainted the members of Dagoska's ruling council with my mission. You will not be surprised to learn that they are less than delighted at the sudden reduction in their powers. My investigation into the disappearance of Superior Davoust is already underway, and I feel confident that results will not be long in coming. I will be appraising the city's defences as soon as possible, and will take any and all steps necessary to ensure that Dagoska is impregnable.

You will hear from me soon. Until then, I serve and obey.

Sand dan Glokta,

Superior of Dagoska.

The sun pressed down on the crumbling battlements like a great weight. It pressed through Glokta's hat and onto his stooped head. It pressed through Glokta's black coat and onto his twisted shoulders. It threatened to squeeze the water right out of him, squash the life right out of him, crush him to his knees. A cool autumn morning in charming Dagoska.

While the sun attacked him from above, the salt wind came at him head on. It swept in off the empty sea and over the bare peninsula, hot and full of choking dust, blasting the land walls of the city and scouring everything with salty grit. It stung at Glokta's sweaty skin, whipped the moisture from his mouth, tickled at his eyes and made them weep stinging tears. Even the weather wants to be rid of me, it would seem.

Practical Vitari teetered along the parapet beside him, arms outstretched like a circus performer on the high rope. Glokta frowned up at her, a gangly black shape against the brilliant sky. *She could just as easily walk down here, and stop making a spectacle of herself. But at least this way there is always the chance of her falling off.* The land walls were twenty strides high at the least. Glokta allowed himself the very slightest smile at the thought of the Arch Lector's favourite Practical slipping, sliding, tumbling from the wall, hands clutching at nothing. *Perhaps a despairing scream as she fell to her death?*

But she didn't fall. *Bitch. Considering her next report to the Arch Lector, no doubt. 'The cripple continues to flounder like a landed fish. He has yet to uncover the slightest trace of Davoust, or any traitor, despite questioning half the city. The one man he has arrested is a member of his own Inquisition . . .'*

Glokta shaded his eyes with his hand and squinted into the blinding sun. The neck of rock that connected Dagoska with the mainland stretched away from him, no more than a few hundred strides across at its narrowest point, the sparkling sea on both sides. The road from the city gates was a brown stripe through the yellow scrub, cutting southwards towards the dry hills on the mainland. A few sorry-looking seabirds squawked and circled over the causeway, but there were no other signs of life.

‘Might I borrow your eye-glass, General?’

Vissbruck flicked the eye-glass open and slapped it sulkily into Glokta’s outstretched hand. *Plainly he feels he has better things to do than give me a tour of the defences.* The General was breathing heavily, standing stiffly to attention in his impeccable uniform, plump face shining with sweat. *Doing his best to maintain his professional bearing. His bearing is the only professional thing about this imbecile, but, as the Arch Lector says, we must work with the tools we have.* Glokta raised the brass tube to his eye.

The Gurkish had built a palisade. A tall fence of wooden stakes that fringed the hills, cutting Dagoska off from the mainland. There were tents scattered about the other side, thin plumes of smoke rising from a cooking fire here or there. Glokta could just about make out tiny figures moving, sun glinting on polished metal. *Weapons and armour, and plenty of both.*

‘There used to be caravans from the mainland,’ Vissbruck murmured. ‘Last year there were a hundred of them every day. Then the Emperor’s soldiers started to arrive, and there were fewer traders. They finished the fence a couple of months ago. There hasn’t been so much as a donkey since. Everything has to come in by ship, now.’

Glokta scanned across the fence, and the camps behind, from the sea on one side to the sea on the other. *Are they simply flexing their muscles, putting on a show of force? Or are they in deadly earnest? The Gurkish love a good show, but they don’t mind a good fight either – that’s how they’ve conquered the whole of the South, more or less.* He lowered the eye-glass. ‘How many Gurkish, do you think?’

Vissbruck shrugged. ‘Impossible to say. At least five thousand, I would guess, but there could be many more, behind those hills. We have no way of knowing.’

Five thousand. At the least. If it’s a show, it’s a good one. ‘How many men have we?’

Vissbruck paused. ‘I have around six hundred Union soldiers under my command.’

Around six hundred? Around? You lackwit dunce! When I was a soldier I knew the name of every man in my regiment, and who was best suited to what tasks. ‘Six hundred? Is that all?’

‘There are mercenaries in the city also, but they cannot be trusted, and frequently cause trouble of their own. In my opinion they are worse than worthless.’

I asked for numbers, not opinions. ‘How many mercenaries?’

‘Perhaps a thousand, now, perhaps more.’

‘Who leads them?’

‘Some Styrian. Cosca, he calls himself.’

‘Nicomo Cosca?’ Vitari was staring down from the parapet, one orange eyebrow raised.

‘You know him?’

‘You could say that. I thought he was dead, but it seems there’s no justice in the world.’

She’s right there. Glokta turned to Vissbruck. ‘Does this Cosca answer to you?’

'Not exactly. The Spicers pay him, so he answers to Magister Eider. In theory, he's supposed to follow my orders—'

'But he only follows his own?' Gloкта could see in the General's face that he was right. *Mercenaries. A double-edged sword, if ever there was one. Keen, as long as you can keep paying, and provided that trustworthiness is not a priority. 'And Cosca's men outnumber yours two to one.' It would appear that, as far as the defences of the city are concerned, I am speaking to the wrong man. Perhaps there is one issue, though, on which he can enlighten me.* 'Do you know what became of my predecessor, Superior Davoust?'

General Vissbruck twitched his annoyance. 'I have no idea. That man's movements were of no interest to me.'

'Hmm,' mused Gloкта, jamming his hat down tighter onto his head as another gritty gust of wind blew in across the walls. 'The disappearance of the city's Superior of the Inquisition? Of no interest whatsoever?'

'None,' snapped the General. 'We rarely had cause to speak to one another. Davoust was well-known as an abrasive character. As far as I am concerned, the Inquisition has its responsibilities, and I have mine.' *Touchy, touchy. But then everyone is, since I arrived in town. You'd almost think they didn't want me here.*

'You have your responsibilities, eh?' Gloкта shuffled to the parapet, lifted his cane and prodded at a corner of crumbling masonry, not far from Vitari's heel. A chunk of stone cracked away and tumbled from the wall into space. A few moments later he heard it clatter into the ditch, far below. He rounded on Vissbruck. 'As commander of the city's defences, would you count the maintenance of the walls as being among your responsibilities?'

Vissbruck bristled. 'I have done everything possible!'

Gloкта counted the points off with the fingers of his free hand. 'The land walls are crumbling and poorly manned. The ditch beyond is so choked with dirt it barely exists. The gates have not been replaced in years, and are falling to pieces on their own. If the Gurmish were to attack tomorrow, I do believe we'd be in quite a sorry position.'

'Not for any oversight on my part, I can assure you! With the heat, and the wind, and the salt from the sea, wood and metal rot in no time, and stone fares little better! Do you realise the task?' The General gestured at the great sweep of the towering land walls, curving away to the sea on either side. Even here at the top, the parapet was wide enough to drive a cart down, and they were a lot thicker at the base. 'I have few skilled masons, and precious little materials! What the Closed Council gives me barely pays for the upkeep of the Citadel! Then the money from the Spicers scarcely keeps the walls of the Upper City in good repair—'

Fool! One could almost believe he did not seriously mean to defend the city at all. 'The Citadel cannot be supplied by sea if the rest of Dagoska is in Gurmish hands, am I right?'

Vissbruck blinked. 'Well, no, but—'

'The walls of the Upper City might keep the natives where they are, but they are too long, too low, and too thin to withstand a concerted attack for long, would you agree?'

'Yes, I suppose so, but—'

'So any plan that treats the Citadel, or the Upper City, as our main line of defence is one that only plays for time. Time for help to arrive. Help that, with our army committed hundreds of leagues away in Angland, might take a while appearing.' *Will never appear at all.* 'If the land walls fall the city is doomed.' Glokta tapped the dusty flags underfoot with his cane. 'Here is where we must fight the Gurmish, and here is where we must keep them out. Everything else is an irrelevance.'

'An irrelevance,' Vitari piped to herself as she hopped from one part of the parapet to another.

The General was frowning. 'I can only do as the Lord Governor and his council instruct me. The Lower City has always been regarded as dispensable. I am not responsible for overall policy—'

'I am.' Glokta held Vissbruck's eye for a very long moment. 'From now on all resources will be directed into the repair and strengthening of the land walls. New parapets, new gates, every broken stone must be replaced. I don't want to see a crack an ant could crawl through, let alone a Gurmish army.'

'But who will do the work?'

'The natives built the damn things in the first place, didn't they? There must be skilled men among them. Seek them out and hire them. As for the ditch, I want it down below sea level. If the Gurmish come we can flood it, and make the city into an island.'

'But that could take months!'

'You have two weeks. Perhaps not even that long. Press every idle man into service. Women and children too, if they can hold a spade.'

Vissbruck frowned up at Vitari. 'And what about your people in the Inquisition?'

'Oh, they're too busy asking questions, trying to find out what happened to your last Superior. Or they're watching me, and my quarters, and the gates of the citadel all day and night, trying to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen to your new one. Be a shame, eh, Vissbruck, if I disappeared before the defences were ready?'

'Of course, Superior,' muttered the General. *But without tremendous enthusiasm, I rather think.*

'Everyone else must work, though, including your own soldiers.'

'But you can't expect my men to—'

'I expect every man to do his part. Anyone who doesn't like it can go back to Adua. He can go back and explain his reluctance to the Arch Lector.' Glokta leered his toothless smile at the General. 'There's no one that can't be replaced, General, no one at all.'

There was a great deal of sweat on Vissbruck's pink face, great drops of it. The stiff collar of his uniform was dark with moisture. 'Of course, every man must do his part! Work on the ditch will begin immediately!' He made a weak attempt at a smile. 'I'll find every man, but I'll need money, Superior. If people work they must be paid, even the natives. Then we will need materials, everything has to be brought in by sea—'

'Borrow what you need to get started. Work on credit. Promise everything and give nothing, for now. His Eminence will provide.' *He'd better.* 'I want reports on your progress every morning.'

‘Every morning, yes.’

‘You have a great deal to do, General. I’d get started.’

Vissbruck paused for a moment, as though unsure whether to salute or not. In the end he simply turned on his heel and stalked off. *The pique of a professional soldier dictated to by a civilian, or something more? Am I upsetting his carefully laid plans? Plans to sell the city to the Gurkish, perhaps?*

Vitari hopped down from the parapet onto the walkway. ‘His Eminence will provide? You’d be lucky.’

Glokta frowned at her back as she sauntered away, then he frowned towards the hills on the mainland, then he frowned up at the citadel. *Dangers on every side. Trapped between the Arch Lector and the Gurkish, and with nobody but an unknown traitor for company. It’ll be a wonder if I last a day.*

A committed optimist might have called the place a dive. *But it scarcely deserves the name.* A piss-smelling shack with some oddments of furniture, everything stained with ancient sweat and recent spillages. *A kind of cesspit with half the cess removed.* Customers and staff were indistinguishable: drunken, fly-blown natives stretched out in the heat. Nicomo Cosca, famed soldier of fortune, sprawled in amongst this scene of debauchery, soundly asleep.

He had his driftwood chair rocked back on its rear legs against the grimy wall, one boot up on the table in front of him. It had probably been as fine and flamboyant a boot as one could hope for, once, black Styrian leather with a golden spur and buckles. *No longer.* The upper was sagging and scuffed grey with hard use. The spur was snapped off short, the gilt on the buckles was flaking away and the iron underneath was spotted with brown rust. A circle of pink, blistered skin peered at Glokta through a hole in the sole.

And a boot could scarcely be better fitted to its owner. Cosca’s long moustaches, no doubt meant to be waxed out sideways in the fashion of a Styrian dandy, flopped limp and lifeless round his half-open mouth. His neck and jaw were covered in a week’s growth, somewhere between beard and stubble, and there was a scabrous, flaking rash peering out above his collar. His greasy hair stuck from his head at all angles, excepting a large bald spot on his crown, angry red with sunburn. Sweat beaded his slack skin, a lazy fly crawled across his puffy face. One bottle lay empty on its side on the table. Another, half-full, was cradled in his lap.

Vitari stared down at this picture of drunken self-neglect, expression of contempt plainly visible despite her mask. ‘So it’s true then, you are still alive.’ *Just barely.*

Cosca prised open one red-rimmed eye, blinked, squinted up, and then slowly began to smile. ‘Shylo Vitari, I swear. The world can still surprise me.’ He worked his mouth, grimacing, glanced down and saw the bottle in his lap, lifted it and took a long, thirsty pull. Deep swallows, just as if it were water in the bottle. *A practised drunkard, as though there was any doubt. Hardly the man one would choose to entrust the defence of the city to, at first glance.* ‘I never expected to see you again. Why don’t you take off the mask? It’s robbing me of your beauty.’

'Save it for your whores, Cosca. I don't need to catch what you've got.'

The mercenary gave a bubbling sound, half laugh, half cough. 'You still have the manners of a princess,' he wheezed.

'Then this shithouse must be a palace.'

Cosca shrugged. 'It all looks the same if you're drunk enough.'

'You think you'll ever be drunk enough?'

'No. But it's worth trying.' As if to prove the point he sucked another mouthful from the bottle.

Vitari perched herself on the edge of the table. 'So what brings you here? I thought you were busy spreading the cock-rot across Styria.'

'My popularity at home had somewhat dwindled.'

'Found yourself on both sides of a fight once too often, eh?'

'Something like that.'

'But the Dagoskans welcomed you with open arms?'

'I'd rather you welcomed me with open legs, but a man can't get everything he wants. Who's your friend?'

Glokta slid out a rickety chair with one aching foot and eased himself into it, hoping it would bear his weight. *Crashing to the floor in a bundle of broken sticks would hardly send the right message, now, would it?* 'My name is Glokta.' He stretched his sweaty neck out to one side, and then the other. 'Superior Glokta.'

Cosca looked at him for a long time. His eyes were bloodshot, sunken, heavy-lidded. *And yet there is a certain calculation there. Not half as drunk as he pretends, perhaps.* 'The same one who fought in Gurkhul? The Colonel of Horse?'

Glokta felt his eyelid flicker. *You could hardly say the same man, but surprisingly well remembered, nonetheless.* 'I gave up soldiery some years ago. I'm surprised you've heard of me.'

'A fighting man should know his enemies, and a hired man never knows who his next enemy might be. It's worth taking notice of who's who, in military circles. I heard your name mentioned, some time ago, as a man worth taking notice of. Bold and clever, I heard, but reckless. That was the last I heard. And now here you are, in a different line of work. Asking questions.'

'Recklessness didn't work out for me in the end.' Glokta shrugged. 'And a man needs something to do with his time.'

'Of course. Never doubt another's choices, I say. You can't know his reasons. You come here for a drink, Superior? They've nothing but this piss, I'm afraid.' He waved the bottle. 'Or have you questions for me?'

That I have, and plenty of them. 'Do you have any experience with sieges?'

'Experience?' spluttered Cosca, 'Experience, you ask? Hah! Experience is one thing I am not short of—'

'No,' murmured Vitari over her shoulder, 'just discipline and loyalty.'

'Yes, well,' Cosca frowned up at her back, 'that all depends on who you ask. But I was at Etrina, and at Muris. Serious pair of sieges, those. And I besieged Visserine myself for a few months and nearly had it, except that she-devil Mercatto caught me unawares. Came on us with cavalry before dawn, sun behind and all, damned unfriendly trick, the bitch—'

'I heard you were passed out drunk at the time,' muttered Vitari.

‘Yes, well . . . Then I held Borletta against Grand Duke Orso for six months —’

Vitari snorted. ‘Until he paid you to open the gates.’

Cosca gave a sheepish grin. ‘It was an awful lot of money. But he never fought his way in! You’d have to give me that, eh, Shylo?’

‘No one needs to fight you, providing they bring their purse.’

The mercenary grinned. ‘I am what I am, and never claimed to be anything else.’

‘So you’ve been known to betray an employer?’ asked Glokta.

The Styrian paused, the bottle halfway to his mouth. ‘I am thoroughly offended, Superior. Nicomo Cosca may be a mercenary, but there are still rules. I could only turn my back on an employer under one condition.’

‘Which is?’

Cosca grinned. ‘If someone else were to offer me more.’

Ah, the mercenary’s code. Some men will do anything for money. Most men will do anything for enough. Perhaps even make a Superior of the Inquisition disappear? ‘Do you know what became of my predecessor, Superior Davoust?’

‘Ah, the riddle of the invisible torturer!’ Cosca scratched thoughtfully at his sweaty beard, picked a little at the rash on his neck and examined the results, wedged under his fingernail. ‘Who knows or cares to know? The man was a swine. I hardly knew him and what I knew I didn’t like. He had plenty of enemies, and, in case you hadn’t noticed, it’s a real snake pit down here. If you’re asking which one bit him, well . . . isn’t that your job? I was busy here. Drinking.’

Not too difficult to believe. ‘What would your opinion be of our mutual friend, General Vissbruck?’

Cosca hunched his shoulders and sank a little lower into his chair. ‘The man’s a child. Playing soldiers. Tinkering with his little castle and his little fence, when the big walls are all that count. Lose those and the game is done, I say.’

‘I’ve been thinking the very same thing.’ *Perhaps the defence of the city could be in worse hands, after all.* ‘Work has already begun on the land walls, and on the ditch beyond. I hope to flood it.’

Cosca raised an eyebrow. ‘Good. Flood it. The Gurmish don’t like the water much. Poor sailors. Flood it. Very good.’ He tipped his head back and sucked the last drops from the bottle, then he tossed it on the dirty floor, wiped his mouth with his dirty hand, then wiped his hand on the front of his sweat-stained shirt. ‘At least someone knows what they’re doing. Perhaps when the Gurmish attack, we’ll last longer than a few days, eh?’ *Providing we aren’t betrayed beforehand.*

‘You never know, perhaps the Gurmish won’t attack.’

‘Oh, I hope they do.’ Cosca reached under his chair and produced another bottle. There was a glint in his eye as he pulled the cork out with his teeth and spat it across the room. ‘I get paid double once the fighting starts.’

It was evening, and a merciful breeze was washing through the audience chamber. Glokta leaned against the wall by the window, watching the

shadows stretch out over the city below.

The Lord Governor was keeping him waiting. *Trying to let me know he's still in charge, whatever the Closed Council might say.* But Glokta didn't mind being still for a while. The day had been a tiring one. Slogging round the city in the baking heat, examining the walls, the gates, the troops. Asking questions. *Questions to which no one has satisfactory answers.* His leg was throbbing, his back was aching, his hand was raw from gripping his cane. *But no worse than usual. I am still standing. A good day, all in all.*

The glowing sun was shrouded in lines of orange cloud. Beneath it a long wedge of sea glittered silver in the last light of the day. The land walls had already plunged half the ramshackle buildings of the Lower City into deep gloom, and the shadows of the tall spires of the great temple stretched out across the roofs of the Upper City, creeping up the slopes of the rock towards the citadel. The hills on the mainland were nothing more than a distant suggestion, full of shadows. *And crawling with Gurkish soldiers. Watching us, as we watch them, no doubt. Seeing us dig our ditches, patch our walls, shore up our gates. How long will they be content to watch, I wonder? How long before the sun goes down for us?*

The door opened and Glokta turned his head, wincing as his neck clicked. It was the Lord Governor's son, Korsten dan Vurms. He shut the door behind him and strode purposefully into the room, metal heel tips clicking on the mosaic floor. *Ah, the flower of the Union's young nobility. The sense of honour is almost palpable. Or did someone fart?*

'Superior Glokta! I hope I have not kept you waiting.'

'You have,' said Glokta as he shuffled to the table. 'That is what happens when one comes late to a meeting.'

Vurms frowned slightly. 'Then I apologise,' he said, in the most unapologetic tone imaginable. 'How are you finding our city?'

'Hot and full of steps.' Glokta dumped himself into one of the exquisite chairs. 'Where is the Lord Governor?'

The frown turned down further. 'I am afraid that my father is unwell, and cannot attend. You understand that he is an old man, and needs his rest. I can speak for him however.'

'Can you indeed? And what do the two of you have to say?'

'My father is most concerned about the work that you are undertaking on the defences. I am told that the King's soldiers have been set to digging holes on the peninsula, rather than defending the walls of the Upper City. You realise that you are leaving us at the mercy of the natives!'

Glokta snorted. 'The natives are citizens of the Union, no matter how reluctant. Believe me, they are more inclined to mercy than the Gurkish.' *Of their mercy I have first-hand experience.*

'They are primitives!' sneered Vurms, 'and dangerous to boot! You have not been here long enough to understand the threat they pose to us! You should talk to Harker. He's got the right ideas as far as the natives are concerned.'

'I talked to Harker, and I didn't like his ideas. I suspect he may have been forced to rethink them, in fact, downstairs, in the dark.' *I suspect he is rethinking even now, and as quickly as his pea of a brain will allow.* 'As for your father's worries, he need no longer concern himself with the defence of the

city. Since he is an old man, and in need of rest, I have no doubt he will be happy to pass the responsibility to me.'

A spasm of anger passed across Vurms' handsome features. He opened his mouth to hiss some curse, but evidently thought better of it. *As well he should.* He sat back in his chair, rubbing one thumb and one finger thoughtfully together. When he spoke, it was with a friendly smile and a charming softness. *Now comes the wheedling.* 'Superior Glokta, I feel we have got off on the wrong foot—'

'I only have one that works.'

Vurms' smile slipped somewhat, but he forged on. 'It is plain that you hold the cards, for the time being, but my father has many friends back in Midderland. I can be a significant hindrance to you, if I have the mind. A significant hindrance or a great help—'

'I am so glad that you have chosen to cooperate. You can begin by telling me what became of Superior Davoust.'

The smile slipped off entirely. 'How should I know?'

'Everyone knows something.' *And someone knows more than the rest. Is it you, Vurms?*

The Lord Governor's son thought about it for a moment. *Dense, or guilty? Is he trying to think of ways to help me, or ways to cover his tracks?* 'I know the natives hated him. They were forever plotting against us, and Davoust was tireless in his pursuit of the disloyal. I have no doubt he fell victim to one of their schemes. I'd be asking questions down in the Lower City, if I was you.'

'Oh, I am quite confident the answers lie here in the Citadel.'

'Not with me,' snapped Vurms, looking Glokta up and down. 'Believe me when I say, I would be much happier if Davoust was still with us.'

Perhaps, or perhaps not, but we will get no answers today. 'Very well. Tell me about the city's stores.'

'The stores?'

'Food, Korsten, food. I understand that, since the Gurkish closed the land routes, everything must be brought in by sea. Feeding the people is surely one of a governor's most pressing concerns.'

'My father is mindful of his people's needs in any eventuality!' snapped Vurms. 'We have provisions for six months!'

'Six months? For all the inhabitants?'

'Of course.' *Better than I expected. One less thing to worry about, at least, from this vast tangle of worries.* 'Unless you count the natives,' added Vurms, as though it was of no importance.

Glokta paused. 'And what will they eat, if the Gurkish lay siege to the city?'

Vurms shrugged. 'I really hadn't thought about it.'

'Indeed? What will happen, do you suppose, when they begin to starve?'

'Well . . .'

'Chaos is what will happen! We cannot hold the city with four fifths of the population against us!' Glokta sucked at his empty gums in disgust. 'You will go to the merchants, you will secure provisions for six months! For everyone! I want six months' supplies for the rats in the sewers!'

'What am I?' sneered Vurms. 'Your grocery boy?'

'I suppose you're whatever I tell you to be.'

All trace of friendliness had vanished from Vurms' face now. 'I am the son of a Lord Governor! I refuse to be addressed in this manner!' The legs of his chair squealed furiously as he sprang up and made for the door.

'Fine,' murmured Glokta. 'There's a boat that goes to Adua every day. A fast boat, and it takes its cargo straight to the House of Questions. They'll address you differently there, believe me. I could easily arrange a berth for you.'

Vurms stopped in his tracks. 'You wouldn't dare!'

Glokta smiled. His most revolting, leering, gap-toothed smile. 'You'd have to be a bold man to bet your life on what I'd dare. How bold are you?' The young man licked his lips, but he did not meet Glokta's gaze for long. *I thought not. He reminds me of my friend Captain Luthar. All flash and arrogance, but with no kind of character to hang it on. Prick him with a pin, and he sags like a punctured wineskin.*

'Six months' food. Six months for everyone. And see that it's done promptly.' *Grocery boy.*

'Of course,' growled Vurms, still staring grimly at the floor.

'Then we can get started on the water. The wells, the cisterns, the pumps. People will need something to wash all your hard work down with, eh? You will report to me every morning.'

Vurms' fists clenched and unclenched by his sides, his jaw muscles worked with fury. 'Of course,' he managed to splutter.

'Of course. You may go.'

Glokta watched him stalk away. *And I have talked to two out of four. Two of four, and I have made two enemies. I will need allies if I am to succeed here. Without allies, I will not last, regardless of what documents I hold. Without allies I will not keep the Gurkish out, if they decide to try and come in. Worse yet, I still know nothing of Davoust. A Superior of the Inquisition, disappeared into thin air. Let us hope the Arch Lector will be patient.*

Hope. Arch Lector. Patience. Glokta frowned. Never have three ideas belonged together less.

The Thing About Trust

The wheel on the cart turned slowly round, and squeaked.

It turned round again, and squeaked. Ferro scowled at it. Damn wheel. Damn cart. She shifted her scorn from the cart to its driver.

Damn apprentice. She didn't trust him a finger's breadth. His eyes flickered over to her, lingered an insulting moment, then darted off. As if he knew something about Ferro that she did not know herself. That made her angry. She looked away from him to the first of the horses, and its rider.

Damn Union boy with his stiff back, sitting in his saddle like a King sits on his throne, as though being born with a good-shaped face was an achievement to be endlessly proud of. He was pretty, and neat, and dainty as a princess. Ferro smiled grimly to herself. The princess of the Union, that's what he was. She hated fine-looking people even more than ugly ones. Beauty was never to be trusted.

You would have had to look far and wide to find anyone less beautiful than the big nine-fingered bastard. He sat in his saddle slumped over like some great sack of rice. Slow-moving, scratching, sniffing, chewing like a big cow. Trying to look like he had no killing in him, no mad fury, no devil. She knew better. He nodded to her and she scowled back. He was a devil wearing a cow's skin, and she was not fooled.

Better than that damn Navigator, though. Always talking, always smiling, always laughing. Ferro hated talk, and smiles, and laughter, each one more than the last. Stupid little man with his stupid tales. Underneath all his lies he was plotting, watching, she could feel it.

That left the First of the Magi, and she trusted him least of all. She saw his eyes sliding to the cart. Looking at the sack he'd put the box in. Square, grey, dull, heavy box. He thought no one had seen, but she had. Full of secrets is what he was. Bald bastard, with his thick neck and his wooden pole, acting as if he had done nothing but good in his life, as if he would not know where to begin at making a man explode.

'Damn fucking pinks,' she whispered to herself. She leaned over and spat onto the track, glowered at their five backs as they rode ahead of her. Why had she let Yulwei talk her into this madness? A voyage way off into the cold west where she had no business. She should have been back in the South, fighting the Gurmish.

Making them pay what they owed her.

Cursing the name of Yulwei silently to herself, she followed the others up to the bridge. It looked ancient – pitted stones splattered with stains of lichen, the surface of it rutted deep where a cart's wheels would roll. Thousands of years of carts, rolling back and forward. The stream gurgled under its single arch, bitter cold water, flowing fast. A low hut stood beside the bridge, settled and slumped into the landscape over long years. Some wisps of smoke were

snatched from its chimney and out across the land in the cutting wind.

One soldier stood outside, alone. Drew the short straw, maybe. He'd pressed himself against the wall, swathed in a heavy cloak, horse-hair on his helmet whipping back and forth in the gusts, his spear ignored beside him. Bayaz reined his horse in before the bridge and nodded across.

'We're going up onto the plain. Out towards Darmium.'

'Can't advise it. Dangerous up there.'

Bayaz smiled. 'Dangers mean profits.'

'Profits won't stop an arrow, friend.' The soldier looked them up and down, one by one, and sniffed. 'Varied crowd, aren't you?'

'I take good fighters wherever I can find them.'

'Course.' He looked over at Ferro and she scowled back. 'Very tough, I'm sure, but the fact is the plains are deadly, and more than ever now. Some traders are still going up there, but they're not coming back. That madman Cabrian has raiders out there, I reckon, keen for plunder. Scario and Goltus too, they're little better. We keep some shred of law on this side of the stream, but once you're up there, you're on your own. There'll be no help for you if you're caught out on the plain.' He sniffed again. 'No help at all.'

Bayaz nodded grimly. 'We ask for none.' He spurred his horse and it began to trot over the bridge, onto the track on the other side. The others followed behind, Longfoot first, then Luthar, then Ninefingers. Quai shook the reins and the cart clattered across. Ferro brought up the rear.

'No help at all!' the soldier called after her, before he wedged himself back against the rough wall of his hut.

The great plain.

It should have been good land for riding, reassuring land. Ferro could have seen an enemy coming from miles away, but she saw no one. Only the vast carpet of tall grass, waving and thrashing in the wind, stretching away in every direction, to the far, far, horizon. Only the track broke the monotony, a line of shorter, drier grass, pocked with patches of bare black earth, cutting across the plain straight as an arrow flies.

Ferro did not like it, this vast sameness. She frowned as they rode, peering left and right. In the Badlands of Kanta, the barren earth was full of features – broken boulders, withered valleys, dried-up trees casting their clawing shadows, distant creases in the earth full of shade, bright ridges doused in light. In the Badlands of Kanta, the sky above would be empty, still, a bright bowl holding nothing but the blinding sun in the day, the bright stars at night.

Here all was strangely reversed.

The earth was featureless, but the sky was full of movement, full of chaos. Towering clouds loomed over the plain, dark and light swirling together into colossal spirals, sweeping over the grassland with the raking wind, shifting, turning, ripping apart and flooding back together, casting monstrous, flowing shadows onto the cowering earth, threatening to crush the six tiny riders and their tiny cart with a deluge to sink the world. All hanging over Ferro's hunched up shoulders, the wrath of God made real.

This was a strange land, one in which she had no place. She needed reasons

to be here, and good ones. 'You, Bayaz!' she shouted, drawing up level with him. 'Where are we going?'

'Huh,' he grunted, frowning out across the waving grass, from nothing, to nothing. 'We are going westwards, across the plain, over the great river Aos, as far as the Broken Mountains.'

'Then?'

She saw the faint lines around his eyes, across the bridge of his nose, grow deeper, watched his lips press together. Annoyance. He did not like her questions. 'Then we go further.'

'How long will it take?'

'All of winter and into spring,' he snapped. 'And then we must come back.' He dug his heels into his horse's flanks and trotted away from her, up the track towards the front of the group.

Ferro was not so easily put off. Not by this shifty old pink. She dug in her own heels and drew up level with him. 'What is the First Law?'

Bayaz looked sharply over at her. 'What do you know about it?'

'Not enough. I heard you and Yulwei talking, through the door.'

'Eavesdropping, eh?'

'You have loud voices and I have good ears.' Ferro shrugged. 'I am not sticking a bucket on my head just to keep your secrets. What is the First Law?'

The lines round Bayaz' forehead grew deeper, the corners of his mouth turned down. Anger. 'A stricture that Euz placed on his sons, the first rule made after the chaos of ancient days. It is forbidden to touch the Other Side direct. Forbidden to communicate with the world below, forbidden to summon demons, forbidden to open gates to hell. Such is the First Law, the guiding principle of all magic.'

'Uh,' snorted Ferro. It meant nothing to her. 'Who is Khalul?'

Bayaz' thick brows drew in together, his frown deepened, his eyes narrowed. 'Is there no end to your questions, woman?' Her questions galled him. That was good. That meant they were the right questions.

'You'll know if I stop asking them. Who is Khalul?'

'Khalul was one of the order of Magi,' growled Bayaz. 'One of my order. The second of Juvens' twelve apprentices. He was always jealous of my place, always thirsty for power. He broke the Second Law to get it. He ate the flesh of men, and persuaded others to do the same. He made of himself a false prophet, tricked the Gurmish into serving him. That is Khalul. Your enemy, and mine.'

'What is the Seed?'

The Magus' face gave a sudden twitch. Fury, and perhaps the slightest trace of fear. Then his face softened. 'What is it?' He smiled at her, and his smile worried her more than all his anger could have. He leaned towards her, close enough that no one else could hear. 'It is the instrument of your vengeance. Of our vengeance. But it is dangerous. Even to speak of it is dangerous. There are those who are always listening. It would be wise for you to shut the door on your questions, before the answers to them burn us all.' He spurred his horse once again, trotting out ahead of the party on his own.

Ferro stayed behind. She had learned enough for now. Learned enough to trust this First of the Magi less than ever.

A hollow in the ground, no more than four strides across. A sink in the soil, ringed by a low wall of damp, dark earth, full of tangled grass roots. That was the best place they had found to camp for the night, and they had been lucky to find it.

It was as big a feature in the landscape as Ferro had seen all day.

The fire that Longfoot had made was burning well now, flames licking bright and hungry at the wood, rustling and flickering out sideways as a gust of wind swept down into the hollow. The five pinks sat clustered around it, hunched and huddled for warmth, light from it bright on their pinched-up faces.

Longfoot was the only one speaking. His talk was all of his own great achievements. How he had been to this place or that. How he knew this thing or that. How he had a remarkable talent for this, or for that. Ferro was sick of it already, and had told him so twice. The first time she thought she had been clear. The second time she had made sure of it. He would not be talking to her of his idiot travels again, but the others still suffered in silence.

There was space for her, down by the fire, but she did not want it. She preferred to sit above them, cross-legged in the grass on the lip of the hollow. It was cold up here in the wind, and she pulled the blanket tighter round her shivering shoulders. A strange and frightening thing, cold. She hated it.

But she preferred cold to company.

And so she sat apart, sullen and silent, and watched the light drain out of the brooding sky, watched the darkness creep into the land. There was just the faintest glow of the sun now, on the distant horizon. A last feeble brightness round the edges of the looming clouds.

The big pink stood up, and looked at her. 'Getting dark,' he said.

'Uh.'

'Guess that's what happens when the sun goes down, eh?'

'Uh.'

He scratched at the side of his thick neck. 'We need to set watches. Could be dangerous out here at night. We'll take it in shifts. I'll go first, then Luthar—'

'I'll watch,' she grunted.

'Don't worry. You can sleep. I'll wake you later.'

'I do not sleep.'

He stared at her. 'What, never?'

'Not often.'

'Maybe that explains her mood,' murmured Longfoot.

Meant to be under his breath, no doubt, but Ferro heard him. 'My mood is my business, fool.'

The Navigator said nothing as he wrapped himself in his blanket and stretched out beside the fire.

'You want to go first?' said Ninefingers, 'then do it, but wake me a couple of hours in. We each should take our turn.'

Slowly, quietly, wincing with the need not to make noise, Ferro stole from the cart. Dry meat. Dry bread. Water flask. Enough to keep her going for days. She shoved it into a canvas bag.

One of the horses snorted and shied as she slipped past and she scowled at it. She could ride. She could ride well, but she wanted nothing to do with horses. Damn fool, big beasts. Smelled bad. They might move quick, but they needed too much food and water. You could see and hear them from miles away. They left great big tracks to follow. Riding a horse made you weak. Rely on a horse and when you need to run, you find you can't any more.

Ferro had learned never to rely on anything except herself.

She slipped the bag over one shoulder, her quiver and her bow over the other. She took one last look at the sleeping shapes of the others, dark mounds clustered round the fire. Luthar had the blanket drawn up under his chin, smooth-skinned, full-lipped face turned towards the glowing embers. Bayaz had his back to her, but she could see the dim light shining off his bald pate, the back of one dark ear, hear the slow rhythm of his breathing. Longfoot had his blanket pulled up over his head, but his bare feet stuck from the other end, thin and bony, tendons standing out like tree roots from the mud. Quai's eyes were open the tiniest chink, firelight shining wet on a slit of eyeball. Made it look like he was watching her, but his chest was moving slowly up and down, mouth hanging slack, sound asleep and dreaming, no doubt.

Ferro frowned. Just four? Where was the big pink? She saw his blanket lying empty on the far side of the fire, dark folds and light folds, but no man inside. Then she heard his voice.

'Going already?'

Behind her. That was a surprise, that he could have crept around her like that, while she was stealing food. He seemed too big, too slow, too noisy to creep up on anyone. She cursed under her breath. She should have known better than to go by the way things seemed.

She turned slowly round to face him and took one step towards the horses. He followed, keeping the distance between them the same. Ferro could see the glowing fire reflected in one corner of each of his eyes, a curve of cratered, stubbly cheek, the vague outline of his bent nose, a few strands of greasy hair floating over his head in the breeze, slightly blacker than the black land behind.

'I don't want to fight you, pink. I've seen you fight.' She had seen him kill five men in a few moments, and even she had been surprised. The memory of the laughter echoing from the walls, his twisted hungry face, half snarl, half smile, covered in blood, and spit, and madness, the ruined corpses strewn on the stones like rags, all this was sharp in her mind. Not that she was frightened, of course, for Ferro Maljinn felt no fear.

But she knew when to be careful.

'I've no wish to fight you either,' he said, 'but if Bayaz finds you gone in the morning, he'll have me chasing you. I've seen you run, and I'd rather fight you than chase you. At least I'd have some chance.'

He was stronger than her, and she knew it. Almost healed now, moving freely. She regretted helping him with that. Helping people was always a mistake. A fight was an awful risk. She might be tougher than others, but

she'd no wish to have her face broken into slop like that big man, the Stone Splitter. No wish to be stuck through with a sword, to have her knees smashed, her head ripped half off.

None of that held any appeal.

But he was too close to shoot, and if she ran he'd rouse the others, and they had horses. Fighting would probably wake them anyway, but if she could land a good blow quickly she might get away in the confusion. Hardly perfect, but what choice did she have? She slowly swung the bag off her shoulder and lowered it to the ground, then her bow and her quiver. She put one hand onto the hilt of her sword, fingers brushing the grip in the darkness, and he did the same.

'Alright then, pink. Let's get to it.'

'Might be there's another way.'

She watched him, suspicious, ready for tricks. 'What way?'

'Stay with us. Give it a few days. If you don't change your mind, well, I'll help you pack. You can trust me.' Trust was a word for fools. It was a word people used when they meant to betray you. If he moved forward a finger's width she would sweep the sword out and take his head off. She was ready.

But he did not move forward and he did not move back. He stood there, a big, silent outline in the darkness. She frowned, fingertips still tickling the grip of the curved sword. 'Why should I trust you?'

The big pink shrugged his heavy shoulders. 'Why not? Back in the city, I helped you and you helped me. Without each other, might be we'd both be dead.' It was true, she supposed, he had helped her. Not as much as she had helped him, but still. 'Time comes you got to stick at something, don't you? That's the thing about trust, sooner or later you just got to do it, without good reasons.'

'Why?'

'Otherwise you end up like us, and who wants that?'

'Huh.'

'I'll do you a deal. You watch my back, I'll watch yours.' He tapped his chest slowly with his thumb. 'I'll stick.' He pointed at her. 'You'll stick. What d'you say?'

Ferro thought about it. Running had given her freedom, but little else. It had taken her through years of misery to the very edge of the desert, hemmed in by enemies. She had run from Yulwei and the Eaters had nearly taken her. Where would she run to now, anyway? Would she run across the sea to Kanta? Perhaps the big pink was right. Perhaps the time had come to stop running.

At least until she could get away unnoticed.

She took her hand away from her sword, slowly folded her arms across her chest, and he did the same. They stood there for a long moment, watching one another in the darkness, in the silence. 'Alright, pink,' she growled. 'I will stick, as you say, and we will see. But I make no fucking promises, you understand?'

'I didn't ask for promises. My turn at the watch. You get some rest.'

'I need no rest, I told you that.'

'Suit yourself, but I'm sitting down.'

'Fine.'

The big pink began to lower himself cautiously towards the earth, and she followed him. They sat cross-legged where they had stood, facing each other, the embers of the campfire glowing beside them, casting a faint brightness over the four sleepers, across one side of the pink's lumpy face, casting a faint warmth across hers.

They watched each other.

Allies

To Arch Lector Sult,

head of his Majesty's Inquisition.

Your Eminence,

Work is underway on the defences of the city. The famous land walls, though powerful, are in a shameful condition, and I have taken vigorous steps to strengthen them. I have also ordered extra supplies, food, armour, and weapons, essential if the city is to stand a siege of any duration.

Unfortunately, the defences are extensive, and the scale of the task vast. I have begun the work on credit, but credit will only stretch so far. I most humbly entreat that your Eminence will send me funds with which to work. Without money our efforts must cease, and the city will be lost.

The Union forces here are few, and morale is not high. There are mercenaries within the city, and I have ordered that more be recruited, but their loyalty is questionable, particularly if they cannot be paid. I therefore request that more of the King's soldiers might be sent. Even a single company could make a difference.

You will hear from me soon. Until then, I serve and obey.

Sand dan Glokta,

Superior of Dagoska.

'This is the place,' said Glokta. 'Uh,' said Frost. It was a rough building of one storey, carelessly built from mud bricks, no bigger than a good-sized wood shed. Chinks of light spilled out into the night from around the ill-fitting door and the ill-fitting shutters in the single window. It was much the same as the other huts in the street, if you could call it a street. It hardly looked like the residence of a member of Dagoska's ruling council. *But then Kahdia is the odd man out in many ways. The leader of the natives. The priest without a temple. The one with least to lose, perhaps?*

The door opened before Glokta even had the chance to knock. Kahdia stood in the doorway, tall and slender in his white robe. 'Why don't you come in?' The Haddish turned, stepped over to the only chair and sat down in it.

'Wait here,' said Glokta.

'Uh.'

The inside of the shed was no more auspicious than the outside. *Clean, and orderly, and poor as hell.* The ceiling was so low that Glokta could only just stand upright, the floor was hard-packed dirt. A straw mattress lay on empty crates at one end of the single room, a small chair beside it. A squat cupboard stood under the window, a few books stacked on top, a guttering candle burning beside them. Apart from a dented bucket for natural functions, that appeared to be the full extent of Kahdia's worldly possessions. *No sign of any hidden corpses of Superiors of the Inquisition, but you never know. A body can be packed away quite neatly, if one cuts it into small enough pieces . . .*

'You should move out of the slums.' Glokta shut the door behind him on creaking hinges, limped to the bed and sat down heavily on the mattress.

'Natives are not permitted within the Upper City, or had you not heard?'

'I'm sure that an exception could be made in your case. You could have chambers in the Citadel. Then I wouldn't have to limp all the way down here to speak to you.'

'Chambers in the Citadel? While my fellows rot down here in the filth? The least a leader can do is to share the burdens of his people. I have little other comfort to give them.' It was sweltering hot down here in the Lower City, but Kahdia did not seem uncomfortable. His gaze was level, his eyes were fixed on Glokta's, dark and cool as deep water. 'Do you disapprove?'

Glokta rubbed at his aching neck. 'Not in the least. Martyrdom suits you, but you'll have to forgive me if I don't join in.' He licked at his empty gums. 'I've made my sacrifices.'

'Perhaps not all of them. Ask your questions.' *Straight to business, then. Nothing to hide? Or nothing to lose?*

'Do you know what became of my predecessor, Superior Davoust?'

'It is my earnest hope that he died in great pain.' Glokta felt his eyebrows lift. *The very last thing I expected – an honest answer. Perhaps the first honest answer that I have received to that question, but hardly one that frees him from suspicion.*

'In great pain, you say?'

'Very great pain. And I will shed no tears if you join him.'

Glokta smiled. 'I don't know that I can think of anyone who will, but Davoust is the matter in hand. Were your people involved in his disappearance?'

'It is possible. Davoust gave us reasons enough. There are many families missing husbands, fathers, daughters, because of his purges, his tests of loyalty, his making of examples. My people number many thousands, and I cannot watch them all. The one thing I can tell you is that I know nothing of his disappearance. When one devil falls they always send another, and here you are. My people have gained nothing.'

'Except Davoust's silence. Perhaps he discovered that you had made a deal with the Gurkish. Perhaps joining the Union was not all your people hoped for.'

Kahdia snorted. 'You know nothing. No Dagoskan would ever strike a deal with the Gurkish.'

'To an outsider, the two of you seem to have much in common.'

'To an ignorant outsider, we do. We both have dark skin, and we both pray to God, but that is the full extent of the similarity. We Dagoskans have never been a warlike people. We remained here on our peninsula, confident in the strength of our defences, while the Gurkish Empire spread like a cancer across the Kantic continent. We thought their conquests were none of our concern. That was our folly. Emissaries came to our gates, demanding that we kneel before the Gurkish Emperor, and acknowledge that the prophet Khalul speaks with the voice of God. We would do neither, and Khalul swore to destroy us. Now, it seems, he will finally succeed. All of the South will be his dominion.' *And the Arch Lector will not be in the least amused.*

'Who knows? Perhaps God will come to your aid.'

'God favours those who solve their own problems.'

'Perhaps we can solve some problems between us.'

'I have no interest in helping you.'

'Even if you help yourself as well? I have it in mind to issue a decree. The gates of the Upper City will be opened, your people will be allowed to come and go in their own city as they please. The Spicers will be turned out of the Great Temple, and it shall once again be your sacred ground. The Dagoskans will be permitted to carry arms; indeed, we will provide you with weapons from our own armouries. The natives will be treated like full citizens of the Union. They deserve nothing less.'

'So. So.' Kahdia clasped his hands together and sat back in his creaking chair. 'Now, with the Gurkish knocking at the gates, you come to Dagoska, flaunting your little scroll as though it was the word of God, and you choose to do the right thing. You are not like all the others. You are a good man, a fair man, a just man. You expect me to believe this?'

'Honestly? I don't care a shit what you believe, and I care about doing the right thing even less – that's all a matter of who you ask. As for being a good man,' and Glokta curled his lip, 'that ship sailed long ago, and I wasn't even there to wave it off. I'm interested in holding Dagoska. That and nothing else.'

'And you know you cannot hold Dagoska without our help.'

'Neither one of us is a fool, Kahdia. Don't insult me by acting like one. We can bicker with each other until the Gurkish tide sweeps over the land walls, or we can cooperate. You never know, together we might even beat them. Your people will help us dig the ditch, repair the walls, hang the gates. You will provide a thousand men to serve in the defence of the city, to begin with, and more later.'

'Will I? Will I indeed? And if, with our help, the city stands? Will our deal stand with it?'

If the city stands, I will be gone. More than likely, Vurms and the rest will be back in charge, and our deal will be dust. 'If the city stands, you have my word that I will do everything possible.'

'Everything possible. Meaning nothing.' You get the idea.

'I need your help, so I'm offering you what I can. I'd offer you more, but I don't have more. You could sulk down here in the slums with the flies for company, and wait for the Emperor to come. Perhaps the great Uthman-ul-Dosht will offer you a better deal.' Glokta looked Kahdia in the eye for a moment. 'But we both know he won't.'

The priest pursed his lips, stroked his beard, then gave a deep sigh. 'They say a man lost in the desert must take such water as he is offered, no matter who it comes from. I accept your deal. Once the temple is empty we will dig your holes, and carry your stone, and wear your swords. Something is better than nothing, and, as you say, perhaps together we can even beat the Gurkish. Miracles do happen.'

'So I've heard,' said Glokta as he shoved on his cane and grunted his way to his feet, shirt sticking to his sweaty back. 'So I've heard.' *But I've never seen one.*

Glokta stretched out on the cushions in his chambers, head back, mouth open, resting his aching body. *The same chambers that were once occupied by my*

illustrious predecessor, Superior Davoust. They were a wide, airy, well-furnished set of rooms. Perhaps they once belonged to a Dagoskan Prince, or a scheming vizier, or a dusky concubine, before the natives were thrown out into the dust of the Lower City. Better by far than my poky shit-hole in the Agriont, except that Superiors of the Inquisition have been known to go missing from these rooms.

One set of windows faced northward, out towards the sea, on the steepest side of the rock, the other looked over the baking city. Both were equipped with heavy shutters. Outside it was a sheer drop over bare stone to jagged rocks and angry salt water. The door was six fingers thick, studded with iron, fitted with a heavy lock and four great bolts. *Davoust was a cautious man, and with good reason, it would seem. So how could assassins have got in, and having got in, how could they remove the body?*

He felt his mouth curving into a smile. *How will they remove mine, when they come? Already my enemies mount up – the sneering Vurms, the punctilious Vissbruck, the merchants whose profits I threaten, the Practicals who served Harker and Davoust, the natives with good reason to hate anyone who wears black, my old enemies the Gurkish, of course, and all that providing his Eminence does not get anxious at the lack of progress, and decide to have me replaced himself. Will anyone come searching for my twisted corpse, I wonder?*

‘Superior.’

Opening his eyes and lifting his head was a great and painful effort. Everything hurt from his exertions of the past few days. His neck clicked like a snapping twig with every movement, his back was stiff and brittle as a mirror, his leg veered between nagging agony and trembling numbness.

Shickel was standing in the doorway, head bowed. The cuts and bruises on her dark face were healed. There was no outward sign of the ordeal she had suffered in the cells below. She never looked him in the eye, though, always at the floor. *Some wounds take time to heal, and others never do. I should know.*

‘What is it, Shickel?’

‘Magister Eider sends you an invitation to dinner.’

‘Does she indeed?’

The girl nodded.

‘Send word that I will be honoured to attend.’

Glokta watched her pad out of the room, head bowed, then he sagged back onto his cushions. *If I disappear tomorrow, at least I will have saved one person. Perhaps that means my life has not been a total waste of time. Sand dan Glokta, shield to the helpless. Is it ever too late to be . . . a good man?*

‘Please!’ squealed Harker. ‘Please! I know nothing!’ He was bound tightly to his chair, unable to move his body far. *But he makes up for it with his eyes.* They darted back and forth over Glokta’s instruments, glittering in the harsh lamplight on the scarred table top. *Oh yes, you understand better than most how this will work. Knowledge is so often the antidote to fear. But not here. Not now. ‘I know nothing!’*

‘I will be the judge of what you know.’ Glokta wiped some sweat from his face. The room was hot as a busy forge and the glowing coals in the brazier were far from helping. ‘If a thing smells like a liar, and is the colour of a liar,

the chances are it is a liar, would you not agree?’

‘Please! We are all on the same side!’ Are we? Are we really? ‘I have told you only the truth!’

‘Perhaps, but not as much of it as I need.’

‘Please! We are all friends here!’

‘Friends? In my experience, a friend is merely an acquaintance who has yet to betray you. Is that what you are, Harker?’

‘No!’

Glokta frowned. ‘Then you are our enemy?’

‘What? No! I just . . . I just . . . I wanted to know what happened! That’s all! I didn’t mean to . . . *please!*’ *Please, please, please, I tire of hearing it.* ‘You have to believe me!’

‘The only thing I have to do is get answers.’

‘Only ask your questions, Superior, I beg of you! Only give me the opportunity to cooperate!’ *Oh indeed, the firm hand does not seem such a fine idea any longer, does it?* ‘Ask your questions, I will do my best to answer!’

‘Good.’ Glokta perched himself on the edge of the table just beside his tightly bound prisoner and looked down at him. ‘Excellent.’ Harker’s hands were tanned deep brown, his face was tanned deep brown, the rest of his body was pale as a white slug with thick patches of dark hair. *Hardly a fetching look. But it could be worse.* ‘Answer me this, then. Why is it that men have nipples?’

Harker blinked. He swallowed. He looked up at Frost, but there was no help there. The albino stared back, unblinking, white skin round his mask beaded with sweat, eyes hard as two pink jewels. ‘I . . . I am not sure I understand, Superior.’

‘Is it not a simple question? Nipples, Harker, on men. What purpose do they serve? Have you not often wondered?’

‘I . . . I . . .’

Glokta sighed. ‘They chafe and become painful in the wet. They dry out and become painful in the heat. Some women, for reasons I could never fathom, insist on fiddling with them in bed, as though we derive anything but annoyance from having them interfered with.’ Glokta reached towards the table, while Harker’s wide eyes followed his every movement, and slid his hand slowly around the grips of the pincers. He lifted them up and examined them, the well-sharpened jaws glinting in the bright lamplight. ‘A man’s nipples,’ he murmured, ‘are a positive hindrance to him. Do you know? Aside from the unsightly scarring, I don’t miss mine in the least.’

He grabbed the tip of Harker’s nipple and dragged it roughly towards him. ‘Ah!’ squawked the one-time Inquisitor, the chair creaking as he tried desperately to twist away. ‘No!’

‘You think that hurts? Then I doubt you’ll enjoy what’s coming.’ And Glokta slid the open jaws of the pincers around the stretched out flesh and squeezed them tight.

‘Ah! Ah! Please! Superior, I beg you!’

‘Your begging is worthless to me. What I need from you is answers. What became of Davoust?’

‘I swear on my life that I don’t know!’

‘Not good enough.’ Glokta began to squeeze harder, the metal edges starting

to bite into the skin.

Harker gave a despairing shriek. 'Wait! I took money! I admit it! I took money!'

'Money?' Glokta let the pressure release a fraction and a drop of blood dripped from the pincers and splattered on Harker's hairy white leg. 'What money?'

'Money Davoust took from the natives! After the rebellion! He had me round up any that I thought might be rich, and he had them hanged along with the rest, and we requisitioned everything they had and split it between us! He kept his share in a chest in his quarters, and when he disappeared . . . I took it!'

'Where is this money now?'

'Gone! I spent it! On women . . . and on wine, and, and, on anything!'

Glokta clicked his tongue. 'Tut, tut.' *Greed and conspiracy, injustice and betrayal, robbery and murder. All the ingredients of a tale to titillate the masses. Saucy, but hardly relevant.* He worked his hand around the pincers. 'It is the Superior himself, not his money, that interests me. Believe me when I say that I grow tired of asking the question. What became of Davoust?'

'I . . . I . . . I don't know!'

True, perhaps. But hardly the answer I need. 'Not good enough.' Glokta squeezed his hand and the metal jaws bit cleanly through flesh and met in the middle with a gentle click. Harker bellowed, and thrashed, and roared in agony, blood bubbling from the red square of flesh where his nipple used to be and running down his pale belly in dark streaks. Glokta winced at a twinge in his neck and stretched his head out until he heard it click. *Strange how, with time, even the most terrible suffering of others can become . . . tedious.*

'Practical Frost, the Inquisitor is bleeding! If you please!'

'I'th thorry.' The iron scraped as Frost dragged it from the brazier, glowing orange. Glokta could feel the heat of it even from where he was sitting. *Ah, hot iron. It keeps no secrets, it tells no lies.*

'No! No! I—' Harker's words dissolved into a bubbling scream as Frost ground the brand into the wound and the room filled slowly with the salty aroma of cooking meat. A smell which, to Glokta's disgust, caused his empty stomach to rumble. *How long is it since I had a good slice of meat?* He wiped a fresh sheen of sweat from his face with his free hand and worked his aching shoulders under his coat.

An ugly business, that we find ourselves in. So why do I do this? The only answer was the soft crunch as Frost slid the iron carefully back into the coals, sending up a dusting of orange sparks. Harker twisted, and whimpered, and shook, his weeping eyes bulging, a strand of smoke still curling up from the blackened flesh on his chest. *An ugly business, of course. No doubt he deserves it, but that changes nothing. Probably he has no clue what became of Davoust, but that changes nothing either. The questions must be asked, and exactly as if he did know the answers.*

'Why do you insist on defying me, Harker? Could it be . . . that you suppose . . . that once I'm done with your nipples I'll have run out of ideas? Is that what you're thinking? That your nipples are where I'll stop?'

Harker stared at him, bubbles of spit forming and breaking on his lips.

Glokta leaned closer. 'Oh, no, no, no. This is only the beginning. This is before the beginning. Time opens up ahead of us in pitiless abundance. Days, and weeks, and months of it, if need be. Do you seriously believe that you can keep your secrets for that long? You belong to me, now. To me, and to this room. This cannot stop until I know what I need to know.' He reached forward and gripped Harker's other nipple between thumb and forefinger. He took up the pincers and opened their bloody jaws. 'How difficult can that be to understand?'

Magister Eider's dining chamber was fabulous to behold. Cloths of silver and crimson, gold and purple, green and blue and vivid yellow, rippled in the gentle breeze from the narrow windows. Screens of filigree marble adorned the walls, great pots as high as a man stood in the corners. Heaps of pristine cushions were tossed about the floor, as though inviting passers-by to sprawl in comfortable decadence. Coloured candles burned in tall glass jars, casting warm light into every corner, filling the air with sweet scent. At one end of the marble hall clear water trickled gently in a star-shaped pool. There was more than a touch of the theatrical about the place. *Like a Queen's boudoir from some Kantic legend.*

Magister Eider, head of the Guild of Spicers, was herself the centrepiece. *The very Queen of merchants.* She sat at the top of the table in a pristine white gown, shimmering silk with just the slightest, fascinating hint of transparency. A small fortune in jewels flashed on every inch of tanned skin, her hair was piled up and held in place with ivory combs, excepting a few strands, curling artfully around her face. It looked very much as if she had been preparing herself all day. *And not a moment was wasted.*

Glokta, hunched in his chair at the opposite end with a bowl of steaming soup before him, felt as if he had shuffled into the pages of a storybook. *A lurid romance, set in the exotic south, with Magister Eider as the heroine, and myself the disgusting, the crippled, the black-hearted villain. How will this fable end, I wonder?* 'So, tell me, Magister, to what do I owe this honour?'

'I understand that you have spoken to the other members of the council. I was surprised, and just a little hurt, that you had not sought an audience with me already.'

'I apologise if you felt left out. It seemed only fitting that I saved the most powerful until last.'

She looked up with an air of injured innocence. *And a most consummately acted one.* 'Powerful? Me? Vurms controls the budget, issues the decrees, Vissbruck commands the troops, holds the defences. Kahdia speaks for the great majority of the populace. I scarcely figure.'

'Come now.' Glokta grinned his toothless grin. 'You are radiant, of course, but I am not quite blinded. Vurms' budget is a pittance compared to what the Spicers make. Kahdia's people have been rendered almost helpless. Through your pickled friend Cosca you command more than twice the troops that Vissbruck does. The only reason the Union is even interested in this thirsty rock is for the trade that your guild controls.'

'Well, I don't like to boast.' The Magister gave an artless shrug. 'But I

suppose that I do have some passing influence in the city. You have been asking questions, I see.'

'That's what I do.' Glokta raised his spoon to his mouth, trying his best not to slurp between his remaining teeth. 'This soup is delicious, by the way.' *And, one hopes, not fatal.*

'I thought you might appreciate it. You see, I have been asking questions also.'

The water plopped and tinkled in the pool, the fabric rustled on the walls, the silverware clicked gently against the fine pottery of their bowls. *I would call that first round a draw.* Carlot dan Eider was the first to break the silence.

'I realise, of course, that you have a mission from the Arch Lector himself. A mission of the greatest importance. I see that you are not a man to mince your words, but you might want to tread a little more carefully.'

'I admit my gait is awkward. A war wound, compounded by two years of torture. It's a wonder I got to keep the leg at all.'

She smiled wide, displaying two rows of perfect teeth. 'I am thoroughly tickled, but my colleagues have found you somewhat less entertaining. Vurms and Vissbruck have both taken a decided dislike to you. High-handed was the phrase they used, I believe, among others I had better not repeat.'

Glokta shrugged. 'I am not here to make friends.' And he drained his glass of a predictably excellent wine.

'But friends can be useful. If nothing else, a friend is one less enemy. Davoust insisted on upsetting everyone, and the results have not been happy.'

'Davoust did not enjoy the support of the Closed Council.'

'True. But no document will stop a knife thrust.'

'Is that a threat?'

Carlot dan Eider laughed. It was an easy, open, friendly laugh. It was hard to believe that anyone who made such a sound could be a traitor, or a threat, or anything other than a perfectly charming host. *And yet I am not entirely convinced.* 'That is advice. Advice born of bitter experience. I would prefer it if you did not disappear quite yet.'

'Really? I had no idea I was such a winning dinner guest.'

'You are terse, confrontational, slightly frightening, and impose severe restrictions on the menu, but the fact is you are more use to me here than . . .' and she waved her hand, 'wherever Davoust went to. Would you care for more wine?'

'Of course.'

She got up from her chair and swept towards him, feet padding on the cool marble like a dancer's. Bare feet, in the Kantic fashion. The breeze stirred the flowing garments around her body as she leaned forwards to fill Glokta's glass, wafted her rich scent in his face. *Just the sort of woman my mother would have wanted me to marry – beautiful, clever, and oh so very rich. Just the sort of woman I would have wanted to marry, for that matter, when I was younger. When I was a different man.*

The flickering candlelight shone on her hair, flashed on the jewels around her long neck, glowed through the wine as it sloshed from the neck of the bottle. *Does she try and charm me merely because I hold the writ of the Closed Council? Nothing more than good business, to be on good terms with the powerful?*

Or does she hope to fool me, and distract me, and lure me away from the unpleasant truth? Her eyes met his briefly, and she gave a tiny, knowing smile and looked back to his glass. *Am I to be her little urchin boy, dirty face pressed up against the baker's window, mouth watering for the sweetmeats I know I can never afford? I think not.*

'Where did Davoust go to?'

Magister Eider paused for a moment, then carefully set down the bottle. She slid into the nearest chair, put her elbows on the table, her chin on her hands, and held Glokta's eye. 'I suspect that he was killed by a traitor in the city. Probably an agent of the Gurmish. At the risk of telling you what you already know, Davoust suspected there was a conspiracy afoot within the city's ruling council. He confided as much to me shortly before his disappearance.'

Did he indeed? 'A conspiracy within the ruling council?' Glokta shook his head in mock horror. 'Is such a thing possible?'

'Let us be honest with each other, Superior. I want what you want. We in the Guild of Spicers have invested far too much time and money in this city to see it fall to the Gurmish, and you seem to offer a better chance of holding on to it than those idiots Vurms and Vissbruck. If there is a traitor within our walls I want him found.'

'Him . . . or her.'

Magister Eider raised one delicate eyebrow. 'It cannot have escaped your notice that I am the only woman on the council.'

'It has not.' Glokta slurped noisily from his spoon. 'But forgive me if I don't discount you quite yet. It will require more than good soup and pleasant conversation to convince me of anyone's innocence.' *Although it's a damn sight more than anyone else has offered me.*

Magister Eider smiled as she raised her glass. 'Then how can I convince you?'

'Honestly? I need money.'

'Ah, money. It always comes back to that. Getting money out of my Guild is like trying to dig up water in the desert – tiring, dirty, and almost always a waste of time.' *Somewhat like asking questions of Inquisitor Harker.* 'How much were you thinking of?'

'We could begin with, say, a hundred thousand marks.'

Eider did not actually choke on her wine. *More of a gentle gurgle.* She set her glass down carefully, quietly cleared her throat, dabbed at her mouth with the corner of a cloth, then looked up at him, eyebrows raised. 'You very well know that no such amount will be forthcoming.'

'I'll settle for whatever you can give me, for now.'

'We'll see. Are your ambitions limited to a mere hundred thousand marks, or is there anything else I can do for you?'

'Actually there is. I need the merchants out of the Temple.'

Eider rubbed gently at her own temples, as though Glokta's demands were giving her a headache. 'He wants the merchants out,' she murmured.

'It was necessary to secure Kahdia's support. With him against us we cannot hope to hold the city for long.'

'I've been telling those arrogant fools the same thing for years, but stamping on the natives has become quite the popular pastime nonetheless. Very well,

when do you want them out?’

‘Tomorrow. At the latest.’

‘And they call you high-handed?’ She shook her head. ‘Very well. By tomorrow evening I could well be the most unpopular Magister in living memory, if I still have my post at all, but I’ll try and sell it to the Guild.’

Glokta grinned. ‘I feel confident that you could sell anything.’

‘You’re a tough negotiator, Superior. If you ever get tired of asking questions, I have no doubt you’ve a bright future as a merchant.’

‘A merchant? Oh, I’m not that ruthless.’ Glokta placed his spoon in the empty bowl and licked at his gums. ‘I mean no disrespect, but how does a woman come to head the most powerful Guild in the Union?’

Eider paused, as though wondering whether to answer or not. *Or judging how much truth to tell when she does.* She looked down at her glass, turned the stem slowly round and round. ‘My husband was Magister before me. When we married I was twenty-two years old, he was near sixty. My father owed him a great deal of money, and offered my hand as payment for the debt.’ *Ah, so we all have our sufferings.* Her lip twisted in a faint scowl. ‘My husband always had a good nose for a bargain. His health began to decline soon after we married, and I took a more and more active role in the management of his affairs, and those of the Guild. By the time he died I was Magister in all but name, and my colleagues were sensible enough to formalise the arrangement. The Spicers have always been more concerned for profit than propriety.’ Her eyes flicked up to look at Glokta. ‘I mean no disrespect, but how does a war hero come to be a torturer?’

It was his turn to pause. *A good question. How did that happen?* ‘There are precious few opportunities for cripples.’

Eider nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving Glokta’s face. ‘That must have been hard. To come back, after all that time in the darkness, and to find that your friends had no use for you. To see in their faces only guilt, and pity, and disgust. To find yourself alone.’

Glokta’s eyelid was twitching, and he rubbed at it gently. He had never discussed such things with anyone before. *And now here I am, discussing them with a stranger.* ‘There can be no doubt that I’m a tragic figure. I used to be a shit of a man, now I’m a husk of one. Take your pick.’

‘I imagine it makes you sick, to be treated that way. Very sick, and very angry.’ *If only you knew.* ‘It still seems a strange decision, though, for the tortured to turn torturer.’

‘On the contrary, nothing could be more natural. In my experience, people do as they are done to. You were sold by your father and bought by your husband, and yet you choose to buy and sell.’

Eider frowned. *Something for her to think about, perhaps?* ‘I would have thought your pain would give you empathy.’

‘Empathy? What’s that?’ Glokta winced as he rubbed at his aching leg. ‘It’s a sad fact, but pain only makes you sorry for yourself.’

Campfire Politics

Logen shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, and squinted up at the few birds circling around over the great flat plain. Damn but his arse hurt. His thighs were sore, his nose was all full of the smell of horse. Couldn't find a comfortable position to put his fruits in. Always squashed, however often he jammed his hand down inside his belt to move 'em. A damn uncomfortable journey this was turning out to be, in all sorts of ways.

He used to talk on the road, back in the North. When he was a boy he'd talked to his father. When he was a young man he'd talked to his friends. When he'd followed Bethod he'd talked to him, all the day long, for they'd been close back then, like brothers almost. Talk took your mind off the blisters on your feet, or the hunger in your belly, or the endless bloody cold, or who'd got killed yesterday.

Logen used to laugh at the Dogman's stories while they slogged through the snow. He used to puzzle over tactics with Threetrees while they rode through the mud. He used to argue with Black Dow while they waded through bogs, and no subject was ever too small. He'd even traded a joke or two with Harding Grim in his time, and there weren't too many who could say that.

He sighed to himself. A long, painful sigh that caught at the back of his throat. Good times, no doubt, but far behind him now, in the sunny valleys of the past. Those boys were all gone back to the mud. All silent, forever. Worse yet, they'd left Logen out in the middle of nowhere with this lot.

The great Jezal dan Luthar wasn't interested in anyone's stories except his own. He sat stiff upright and aloof the whole time, chin held high, displaying his arrogance, and his superiority, and his contempt for everything like a young man might show off his first sword, long before he learned that it was nothing to be proud of.

Bayaz had no interest in tactics. When he spoke at all he barked in single words, in yeses and in nos, frowning out across the endless grass like a man who's made a bad mistake and can't see his way clear of it. His apprentice too seemed changed since they left Adua. Quiet, hard, watchful. Brother Longfoot was away across the plain, scouting out the route. Probably best that way. No one else had any talk at all. The Navigator, Logen had to admit, had far too much.

Ferro rode some distance away from the rest of this friendly gathering, her shoulders hunched, her brows drawn down in a constant scowl, the long scar on her cheek puckered up an angry grey, doing her best to make the others look like a sack of laughs. She leaned forwards, into the wind, pushing at it, as if she hoped to hurt it with her face. More fun to trade jokes with the plague than with her, Logen reckoned.

And that was the merry band. His shoulders slumped. 'How long until we get to the Edge of the World?' he asked Bayaz, without much hope.

'Some way yet,' growled the Magus through barely open teeth.

So Logen rode on, tired, and sore, and bored, and watched those few birds gliding slowly over the endless plain. Nice, big, fat birds. He licked his lips. 'We could do with some meat,' he muttered. Hadn't had fresh meat in a good long time now. Not since they left Calcis. Logen rubbed his stomach. The fatty softness from his time in the city was already tightening. 'Nice bit of meat.'

Ferro frowned over at him, then up at the few birds circling above. She shrugged her bow off her shoulder.

'Hah!' chuckled Logen. 'Good luck.' He watched her slide an arrow smoothly out from her quiver. Futile gesture. Even Harding Grim could never have made that shot, and he was the best man Logen had ever seen with a bow. He watched Ferro nock her shaft to the curved wood, back arched, yellow eyes fixed on the gliding shapes overhead.

'You'll never bag one of those, not in a thousand years of trying.' She pulled back the string. 'Waste of a shaft!' he shouted. 'You've got to be realistic about these things!' Probably the arrow would drop back down and stab him in the face. Or stick his horse through the neck, so it died and fell over and crushed him under it. A fitting end to this nightmare of a journey. A moment later one of the birds tumbled down into the grass, Ferro's arrow stuck right through it.

'No,' he whispered, gawping open-mouthed at her as she bent the bow again. Another arrow sailed up into the grey sky. Another bird flopped to the earth, just beside the first. Logen stared at it, disbelieving. 'No!'

'Don't tell me you haven't seen stranger things,' said Bayaz. 'A man who talks to spirits, who travels with Magi, the most feared man in all the North?'

Logen pulled his horse up and slithered down from the saddle. He walked through the long grass, bent down on wobbly, aching legs and picked up one of the birds. The shaft had stuck it right through the centre of the breast. If Logen had stabbed it with the arrow at a distance of a foot, he could hardly have done it more neatly. 'That's wrong.'

Bayaz grinned down, hands crossed on the saddle before him. 'In ancient days, before history, so the legends say, our world and the Other Side were joined. One world. Demons walked the land, free to do as they pleased. Chaos, beyond dreaming. They bred with humans, and their offspring were half breeds. Part man, part demon. Devil-bloods. Monsters. One among them took the name Euz. He delivered humanity from the tyranny of devils, and the fury of his battle with them shaped the land. He split the world above from the world below, and he sealed the gates between. To prevent such terror ever coming again, he pronounced the First Law. It is forbidden to touch the Other Side direct, or to speak with devils.'

Logen watched the others watch Ferro. Luthar and Quai, both frowning at this uncanny display of archery. She leaned right back in her saddle, bow string drawn as tight as it would go, glittering point of the next shaft held perfectly steady, still managing to nudge her mount this way and that with her heels. Logen could scarcely make a horse do what he wanted with the reins in his hands, but he failed to see what Bayaz' crazy story had to do with it. 'Devils and so on, the First Law.' Logen waved his hand. 'So what?'

'From the start the First Law was filled with contradictions. All magic comes from the Other Side, falling upon the land as the light falls from the sun. Euz

himself was part devil, and so were his sons – Juvens, Kanedias, Glustrod – and others beside. Their blood brought them gifts, and curses. Power, and long life, and strength or sight beyond the limits of simple men. Their blood passed on into their children, growing ever thinner, into their children's children, and so on through the long centuries. The gifts skipped one generation, then another, then came but rarely. The devil-blood grew thin, and died out. It is rare indeed now, when our world and the world below have drifted so far apart, to see those gifts made flesh. We truly are privileged to witness it.'

Logen raised his eyebrows. 'Her? Half devil?'

'Much less than half, my friend.' Bayaz chuckled. 'Euz himself was half, and his power threw up the mountains and gouged out the seas. Half could strike a horror and a desire into your blood to stop your heart. Half could blind you to look upon. Not half. No more than a fraction. But in her, there is a trace of the Other Side.'

'The Other Side, eh?' Logen looked down at the dead bird in his hand. 'So if I was to touch her, would I break the First Law?'

Bayaz chuckled. 'Now that is a sharp question. You always surprise me, Master Ninefingers. I wonder what Euz would say to it?' The Magus pursed his lips. 'I think I could find it in myself to forgive you. She however,' and Bayaz nodded his bald head at Ferro, 'would most likely cut your hand off.'

Logen lay on his belly, peering through the tall grass into a gentle valley with a shallow brook in its bottom. There was a huddle of buildings on the side nearest them, or the shells of buildings. No roofs left, nothing but the tumbledown walls, mostly no more than waist high, the fallen stones from them scattered across the valley's slopes, in amongst the waving grass. It could have been a scene out of the North. Lots of villages abandoned there, since the wars. People driven out, dragged out, burned out. Logen had watched it happen, often. He'd joined in more than once. He wasn't proud of it, but he wasn't proud of much from those times. Or any other, come to think of it.

'Not a lot left to live in,' whispered Luthar.

Ferro scowled at him. 'Plenty left to hide behind.'

Evening was coming on, the sun had dropped low on the horizon and filled the broken village up with shadows. There was no sign of anyone down there. No sounds beyond the giggling water, the slow wind slithering through the grass. No sign of anyone, but Ferro was right. No sign didn't necessarily mean no danger.

'You had best go down there and take a look,' murmured Longfoot.

'I best?' Logen glanced sideways at him. 'You're staying here then, eh?'

'I have no talent for fights. You are well aware of that.'

'Huh,' muttered Logen. 'No talent for the sorting of fights, plenty for the finding of 'em though.'

'Finding things is what I do. I'm here to Navigate.'

'Maybe you could find me a decent meal and a bed to sleep in,' snapped Luthar, in his whining Union accent.

Ferro sucked her teeth with disgust. 'Someone's got to go,' she growled, sliding over the lip of the slope on her belly. 'I'll take the left.'

No one else moved. 'Us too,' Logen grunted at Luthar.

'Me?'

'Who else? Three's a good number. Let's go, and let's keep it stealthy.'

Luthar peered through the grass into the valley, licked his lips, rubbed his palms together. Nervous, Logen could tell, nervous but proud at the same time, like an untried boy before a battle, trying to show he's not scared by sticking his chin out. Logen wasn't fooled. He'd seen it all a hundred times before.

'You planning to wait for the morning?' he grunted.

'Just keep your mind on your own shortcomings, Northman,' hissed Luthar as he started to wriggle forward down the slope. 'You've enough of them!' The rowels of his big, shiny spurs rattled loud as he dragged himself over the edge, clumsy and unpractised, his arse sticking up in the air.

Logen grabbed hold of his coat before he got more than a stride. 'You're not leaving those on are you?'

'What?'

'Those fucking spurs! Stealthy I said! You might as well hang a bell off your cock!'

Luthar scowled as he sat up to pull them off.

'Stay down!' hissed Logen, pushing him back into the grass on his back. 'You want to get us killed?'

'Get off me!'

Logen shoved him down again, then stabbed at him with his finger to make sure he got the point. 'I'm not dying over your fucking spurs and that's a fact! If you can't keep quiet you can stay here with the Navigator.' He glowered over at Longfoot. 'Maybe you both can navigate your way into the village once we've made sure it's safe.' He shook his head and crawled down the slope after Ferro.

She was already halfway to the brook, rolling and slithering over the crumbled walls, sneaking across the spaces in between them, keeping low, hand on the grip of her curved sword, quick and silent as the wind over the plain.

Impressive, no doubt, but Logen was nobody's fool when it came to a spot of sneaking. He'd been known for it, when he was younger. Lost count of the number of Shanka, the number of men he'd come up behind. The first you'll hear of the Bloody-Nine is the blood hissing out of your neck, that used to be the rumour. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he's stealthy.

He flowed up to the first wall, slid one leg over it, silent as a mouse. He lifted himself up, smooth as butter, keeping quiet, keeping low. His back foot caught on a set of loose stones, dragged them scraping with him. He grabbed at them, fumbled them, knocked over even more with his elbow and they clattered down loud around him. He stumbled onto his weak ankle, twisted it, squawked with pain, fell over and rolled through a patch of thistles.

'Shit,' he grunted, struggling up, one hand clutching at the hilt of his sword, all tangled up with his coat. Good thing he hadn't had it out, or he could've stuck himself through with it. Happened to a friend of his. So busy shouting that he tripped on a tree root and cut a big piece out of his head on his own axe. Back to the mud double time.

He crouched among the fallen stones, waiting for someone to jump him. No one came. Just the wind breathing through the gaps in the old walls, the water chuckling away in the brook. He crept along beside a heap of rough stones, through an old doorway, slithered over a slumping wall, limping and gasping on his bad foot, scarcely making any effort to stay quiet any longer. There was no one there. He'd known it as soon as he fell. No way they could have missed that sorry performance. The Dogman would most likely have been weeping right about now, had he been alive. He waved up at the ridge, and a moment later he saw Longfoot stand up and wave as well.

'No one here,' he muttered to himself.

'Just as well,' hissed Ferro's voice, not more than a stride or two behind. 'You got a new way of scouting, pink. Make so much noise that they come to you.'

'Out of practice,' grunted Logen. 'Still, no harm done. No one here.'

'There was.' She was standing in the shell of one of the ruined buildings, frowning down at the ground. A burned patch in the grass, a few stones set around it. A campfire.

'No more 'n a day or two old,' muttered Logen, poking at the ashes with a finger.

Luthar walked up behind them. 'No one here after all.' He had a smug, sucked-in look on his face, like he'd somehow been right about something all along. Logen didn't see what.

'Lucky for you there isn't, or we might be stitching you together right about now!'

'I'd be stitching the fucking pair of you!' hissed Ferro. 'I ought to stitch your useless pink heads together! You're both as worthless as a bag of sand in the desert! There's tracks over there. Horses, more than one cart.'

'Merchants maybe?' asked Logen, hopefully. He and Ferro looked at each other for a moment. 'Might be better if we stay off the track from now on.'

'Too slow.' Bayaz had made it down into the village now. Quai and Longfoot weren't far behind with the cart and the horses. 'Far too slow. We stick to the track. We'll see anyone coming in good time out here. Plenty of time.'

Luthar didn't look convinced. 'If we see them, they'll see us. What then?'

'Then?' Bayaz raised an eyebrow. 'Then we have the famous Captain Luthar to protect us.' He looked round at the ruined village. 'Running water, and shelter, of a kind. Seems like a good place to camp.'

'Good enough,' muttered Logen, already rooting through the cart for logs to start a fire of their own. 'I'm hungry. What happened to those birds?'

Logen sat, and watched the others eat over the rim of his pot.

Ferro squatted at the very edge of the shifting light from the campfire, hunched over, shadowy face almost stuck right into her bowl, staring around suspiciously and shoving food in with her fingers like she was worried it might be snatched away any moment. Luthar was less enthusiastic. He was nibbling daintily at a wing with his bared front teeth, as though touching it with his lips might poison him, discarded morsels lined up carefully along the side of his platter. Bayaz chewed away with some relish, his beard glistening with

gravy. 'It's good,' he muttered around a mouthful. 'You might want to consider cookery as a career, Master Ninefingers, if you should ever grow tired of . . .' he waved his spoon, 'whatever it is you do.'

'Huh,' said Logen. In the North everyone took their turn at the fire, and it was reckoned an honour to do it. A good cook was almost as valued as a good fighter. Not here. These were a sorry crowd when it came to minding the pot. Bayaz could just about get his tea boiled, and that was as far as he went. Quai could get a biscuit out of the box on a good day. Logen doubted whether Luthar would even have known which way up the pot went. As for Ferro, she seemed to despise the whole notion of cooking. Logen reckoned she was used to eating her food raw. Perhaps while it was still alive.

In the North, after a hard day on the trail, when the men gathered around the long fires to eat, there was a strict order to who sat where. The chief would go at the top, with his sons and the Named Men of the clan around him. Next came the Carls, in order of fame. Thralls were lucky to get their own small fires further out. Men would always have their place, and only change it when their chief offered, out of respect for some great service they'd done him, or for showing rare good bones in a fight. Sitting out of place could earn you a kicking, or a killing even. Where you sat round the fire was where you stood in life, more or less.

It was different out here on the plains, but Logen could still see a pattern in who sat where, and it was far from a happy one. He and Bayaz were close enough to the fire, but the others were further than comfort would have put them. Drawn close by the wind, and the cold, and the damp night, pushed further out by each other. He glanced over at Luthar, sneering down into his bowl as though it was full of piss. No respect. He glanced over at Ferro, staring yellow knives at him through narrowed eyes. No trust. He shook his head sadly. Without trust and respect the group would fall apart in a fight like walls without mortar.

Still, Logen had won over tougher audiences, in his time. Threetrees, Tul Duru, Black Dow, Harding Grim, he'd fought each one in single combat, and beaten them all. Spared each man's life, and left him bound to follow. Each one had tried their best to kill him, and with good reasons too, but in the end Logen had earned their trust, and their respect, and their friendship even. Small gestures and a lot of time, that was how he'd done it. 'Patience is the chief of virtues,' his father used to say, and 'you won't cross the mountains in a day.' Time might be against them, but there was nothing to be gained by rushing. You have to be realistic about these things.

Logen uncrossed his stiff legs, took hold of the water-skin and got up, walked slowly over to where Ferro was sitting. Her eyes followed him all the way across. She was a strange one, no doubt, and not just the looks of her, though the dead knew her looks were strange enough. She seemed hard and sharp and cold as a new sword, ruthless as any man that Logen could think of. You would have thought she wouldn't throw a log to save a drowning man, but she'd done more than that to save him, and more than once. Out of all of them, she was the one he'd trust first, and furthest. So he squatted down and held the skin out to her, its bulbous shadow flickering and shifting on the rough wall behind her.

She frowned at it for a moment, then frowned up at Logen. Then she snatched it off him and bent back over her pot, half turning her bony shoulders on him. Not a word of thanks, or a gesture even, but he didn't mind. You won't cross the mountains in a day, after all.

He dropped down again beside the fire, watched the flames dancing, casting shifting light across the grim faces of the group. 'Anyone know any stories?' he asked, hopefully.

Quai sucked at his teeth. Luthar curled his lip at Logen across the fire. Ferro gave no sign that she had even heard. Hardly an encouraging start.

'Not any?' No reply. 'Alright then, I know a song or two, if I can remember the words,' he cleared his throat.

'Very well!' cut in Bayaz. 'If it will save us from a song, I know hundreds of stories. What did you have it in mind to hear about? A romance? A comedy? A tale of bravery against the odds?'

'This place,' cut in Luthar. 'The Old Empire. If it was such a great nation, how did it come to this?' He jerked his head over at the crumbling walls, and what they all knew lay beyond. The miles and miles of nothing. 'A wasteland.'

Bayaz sighed. 'I could tell that tale, but we are lucky enough to have a native of the Old Empire with us on our little trip, and a keen student of history to boot. Master Quai?' The apprentice looked up lazily from the fire. 'Would you care to enlighten us? How did the Empire, once the glittering centre of the world, come to this pass?'

'That story is long in the telling,' murmured the apprentice. 'Shall I start from the beginning?'

'Where else should a man ever start?'

Quai shrugged his bony shoulders and began to speak. 'Almighty Euz, vanquisher of demons, closer of gates, father of the World, had four sons, and to each he gave a gift. To his eldest, Juvens, he gave the talent of High Art, the skill to change the world with magic, tempered by knowledge. To his second son, Kanedias, went the gift of making, of shaping stone and metal to his own purposes. To his third son, Bedesh, Euz gave the skill of speaking with spirits, and of making them do his bidding.' Quai gave a wide yawn, smacked his lips and blinked at the fire. 'So were born the three pure disciplines of magic.'

'I thought he had four sons,' grumbled Luthar.

Quai's eyes slid sideways. 'So he did, and therein lies the root of the Empire's destruction. Glustrod was the youngest son. To him should have gone the gift of communing with the Other Side. The secrets of summoning devils from the world below and binding them to one's will. But such things were forbidden by the First Law, and so Euz gave nothing to his youngest son but his blessing, and we all know what those are worth. He taught the other three their share of his secrets and left, ordering his sons to bring order to the world.'

'Order.' Luthar tossed his platter down on the grass beside him and glanced disdainfully round at the shadowy ruins. 'They didn't get far.'

'At first they did. Juvens set about his purpose with a will, and bent all his power and all his wisdom to it. He found a people that pleased him, living beside the Aos, and favoured them with laws and learning, government and

science. He gave to them the skills to conquer their neighbours, and made of their chief an Emperor. Son followed father, year followed year, and the nation grew and prospered. The lands of the Empire stretched as far as Isparda in the south, Anconus in the north, the very shores of the Circle Sea to the east, and beyond. Emperor followed Emperor, but always Juvens was there – guiding, advising, shaping all things according to his grand design. All was civilised, all was peaceful, all was content.’

‘Almost all,’ muttered Bayaz, poking at the guttering fire with a stick.

Quai gave a smirk. ‘We have forgotten Glustrod, just as his father did. The ignored son. The shunned son. The cheated son. He begged all three brothers for a share of their secrets, but they were jealous of their gifts, and all three refused him. He looked upon what Juvens had achieved, and was bitter beyond words. He found dark places in the world, and in secret he studied those sciences forbidden by the First Law. He found dark places in the world, and he touched the Other Side. He found dark places, and he spoke in the tongue of devils, and he heard their voices answer him.’ Quai’s voice dropped down to a whisper. ‘And the voices told Glustrod where to dig . . .’

‘Very good, Master Quai,’ cut in Bayaz, sternly. ‘Your grip on the histories seems much improved. Let us not tarry on the details, however. We can leave Glustrod’s diggings for another day.’

‘Of course,’ murmured Quai, his dark eyes glittering in the firelight, his gaunt face full of gloomy hollows. ‘You know best, master. Glustrod laid plans. He watched from the shadows. He garnered secrets. He flattered, and he threatened, and he lied. It did not take him long to turn the weak-willed to his purposes, and the strong-willed against each other, for he was cunning, and charming, and fair to look upon. He heard the voices always, now, from the world below. They suggested that he sow discord everywhere, and he listened. They urged him to eat the flesh of men, and steal their power, and he did so. They commanded him to seek out those devil-bloods that remained in our world, spurned, hated, exiled, and make from them an army, and he obeyed.’

Something touched Logen’s shoulder from behind and he near jumped in the air. Ferro was standing over him, the water-skin held out in her hand. ‘Thanks,’ he growled as he took it from her, pretending that his heart wasn’t knocking at his ribs. He took a quick swig and banged the stopper in with his palm, then put it down beside him. When he looked up, Ferro hadn’t moved. She stood there above him, looking down at the dancing flames. Logen shuffled up a step, making room. Ferro scowled, sucked her teeth, kicked at the ground, then slowly squatted down on her haunches, making sure to leave plenty of space between them. She held her hands out to the fire and bared her shining teeth at it.

‘Cold over there.’

Logen nodded. ‘These walls don’t keep the wind off much.’

‘No.’ Her eyes swept across the group and found Quai. ‘Don’t stop for me,’ she snapped.

The apprentice grinned. ‘Strange and sinister was the host that Glustrod gathered. He waited for Juvens to leave the Empire, then he crept into the capital at Aulcus and set his well-laid schemes in motion. It seemed as if a madness swept the city. Son fought with father, wife with husband, neighbour

with neighbour. The Emperor was cut down on the steps of his palace by his own sons and then, maddened with greed and envy, they turned upon each other. Glustrod's twisted army had slithered into the sewers beneath the city and rose up, turning the streets into charnel pits, the squares into slaughter yards. Some among them could take forms, stealing the faces of others.'

Bayaz shook his head. 'Taking forms. A dread and insidious trick.' Logen remembered a woman, in the cold darkness, who had spoken with the voice of his dead wife, and he frowned and hunched his shoulders.

'A dread trick indeed,' said Quai, his sickly grin growing even wider. 'For who can be trusted if one cannot trust one's own eyes, one's own ears, to tell friend from foe? But worse was to come. Glustrod summoned demons from the Other Side, bound them to his will and sent them to destroy those who might resist him.'

'Summoning and sending,' hissed Bayaz. 'Cursed disciplines. Dire risks. Terrible breaches of the First Law.'

'But Glustrod recognised no law beyond his own strength. Soon he sat in the Emperor's throne room upon a pile of skulls, sucking the flesh of men as a baby sucks milk, basking in his awful victory. The Empire descended into chaos, the very slightest taste of the chaos of ancient days, before the coming of Euz, when our world and the world below were one.'

A gust of wind sighed through the chinks in the ancient stonework around them, and Logen shivered and pulled his blanket tight around him. Damn story was making him nervous. Stealing faces, and sending devils, and eating men. But Quai did not stop. 'When he found out what Glustrod had done, Juvens' fury was terrible, and he sought the aid of his brothers. Kanedias would not come. He stayed sealed in his house, tinkering with his machines, caring nothing for the world outside. Juvens and Bedesh raised an army without him, and they fought a war against their brother.'

'A terrible war,' muttered Bayaz, 'with terrible weapons, and terrible casualties.'

'The fighting spread across the continent from one end to the other, and drew in every petty rivalry, and gave birth to a host of feuds, and crimes, and vengeance, whose consequences still poison the world today. But in the end Juvens was victorious. Glustrod was besieged in Aulcus, his changelings unmasked, his army scattered. Now, in his most desperate moment, the voices from the world below whispered to him a plan. Open a gate to the Other Side, they said. Pick the locks, and crack the seals, and throw wide the doors that your father made. Break the First Law one last time, they said, and let us back into the world, and you will never again be ignored, be shunned, be cheated.'

The First of the Magi nodded slowly to himself. 'But he was cheated once more.'

'Poor fool! The creatures of the Other Side are made of lies. To deal with them is to grasp the most awful peril. Glustrod made ready his rituals, but in his haste he made some small mistake. Only a grain of salt out of place, perhaps, but the results were horrible indeed. The great power that Glustrod had gathered, strong enough to tear a hole in the fabric of the world, was released without form or reason. Glustrod destroyed himself. Aulcus, great and beautiful capital of the Empire, was laid waste, the land around it forever

poisoned. No one ventures within miles of the place now. The city is a shattered graveyard. A blasted ruin. A fitting monument to the folly and the pride of Glustrod and his brothers.' The apprentice glanced up at Bayaz. 'Do I speak the truth, master?'

'You do,' murmured the Magus. 'I know. I saw it. A young fool with a full and lustrous head of hair.' He ran a hand over his bald scalp. 'A young fool who was as ignorant of magic, and wisdom, and the ways of power as you are now, Master Quai.'

The apprentice inclined his head. 'I live only to learn.'

'And in that regard, you seem much improved. How did you like that tale, Master Ninefingers?'

Logen puffed out his cheeks. 'I'd been hoping for something with a few more laughs, but I guess I'll take what's offered.'

'A pack of nonsense, if you ask me,' sneered Luthar.

'Huh,' snorted Bayaz. 'How fortunate for us that no one did. Perhaps you ought to get the pots washed, Captain, before it gets too late.'

'Me?'

'One of us caught the food, and one of us cooked it. One of us has entertained the group with a tale. You are the only one among us who has as yet contributed nothing.'

'Apart from you.'

'Oh, I am far too old to be sloshing around in streams at this time of night.' Bayaz' face grew hard. 'A great man must first learn humility. The pots await.'

Luthar opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, pushed himself angrily up from his place and threw his blanket down in the grass. 'Damn pots,' he cursed as he snatched them up from around the fire and stomped off towards the brook.

Ferro watched him go, a strange expression on her face that might even have been her version of a smile. She looked back at the fire, and licked her lips. Logen pulled the stopper from the water skin and held it out to her.

'Uh,' she grunted, snatched it from his hand, took a quick swallow. While she was wiping her mouth on her sleeve, she glanced sideways at him, and frowned. 'What?'

'Nothing,' he said quickly, looking away and holding up his empty palms. 'Nothing at all.' He was smiling on the inside, though. Small gestures and time. That was how he'd get it done.

Small Crimes

‘Cold, eh, Colonel West?’ ‘Yes, your Highness, winter is nearly upon us.’ There had been a kind of snow in the night. A cold, wet sleet that covered everything in icy moisture. Now, in the pale morning, the whole world seemed half-frozen. The hooves of their horses crunched and slurped in the half-frozen mud. Water dripped sadly from the half-frozen trees. West was no exception. His breath smoked from his runny nose. The tips of his ears tingled unpleasantly, numb from the cold.

Prince Ladisla hardly seemed to notice, but then he was swathed in an enormous coat, hat and mittens of shining black fur, no doubt several hundred marks worth of it. He grinned over. ‘The men seem good and fit, though, in spite of it all.’

West could scarcely believe his ears. The regiment of the King’s Own that had been placed under Ladisla’s command seemed happy enough, it was true. Their wide tents were pitched in orderly rows in the middle of the camp, cooking fires in front, horses tethered nearby in good order.

The position of the levies, who made up a good three quarters of their strength, was less happy. Many were shamefully ill-prepared. Men with no training or no weapons, some who were plainly too ill or too old for marching, let alone for battle. Some had little more than the clothes they stood up in, and those were in a woeful state. West had seen men huddled together under trees for warmth, nothing but half a blanket to keep the rain off. It was a disgrace.

‘The King’s Own are well provided for, but I’m concerned about the situation of some of the levies, your—’

‘Yes,’ said Ladisla, talking over him precisely as if he had not spoken, ‘good and fit! Chomping at the bit! Must be the fire in their bellies keeps ’em warm, eh, West? Can’t wait to get at the enemy! Damn shame we have to wait here, kicking our heels behind this damn river!’

West bit his lip. Prince Ladisla’s incredible powers of self-deception were becoming more frustrating with every passing day. His Highness had fixed upon the idea of being a great and famous general, with a matchless force of fighting men under his command. Of winning a famous victory, and being celebrated as a hero back in Adua. Rather than exerting a single particle of effort to make it happen, however, he behaved as if it already had, utterly regardless of the truth. Nothing which was distasteful, or displeasing, or at odds with his cock-eyed notions could be permitted to be noticed. Meanwhile, the dandies on his staff, without a month’s military experience between them, congratulated him on his fine judgement, slapped each other on the back, and agreed with his every utterance, no matter how ludicrous.

Never to want for anything, or work for anything, or show the tiniest grain of self-discipline in a whole life must give a man a strange outlook on the

world, West supposed, and here was the proof, riding along beside him, smiling away as though the care of ten thousand men was a light responsibility. The Crown Prince and the real world, as Lord Marshal Burr had observed, were entire strangers to one another.

‘Cold,’ Ladisla murmured. ‘Not much like the deserts of Gurkhul now, eh, Colonel West?’

‘No, your Highness.’

‘But some things are the same, eh? I’m speaking of war, West! War in general! The same everywhere! The courage! The honour! The glory! You fought with Colonel Glokta, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, your Highness, I did.’

‘I used to love to hear stories of that man’s exploits! One of my heroes, when I was young. Riding round the enemy, harassing his lines of communication, falling on the baggage train and whatnot.’ The Prince’s riding crop rode around, harassed, and fell on imaginary baggage in the air before him. ‘Capital! And I suppose you saw it all?’

‘Some of it, your Highness, yes.’ He had seen a great deal of saddle-soreness, sunburn, looting, drunkenness, and vainglorious showing-off.

‘Colonel Glokta, I swear! We could do with some of that dash here, eh, West? Some of that vim! That vigour! Shame that he’s dead.’

West looked up. ‘He isn’t dead, your Highness.’

‘He isn’t?’

‘He was captured by the Gurmish, and then returned to the Union when the war ended. He . . . er . . . he joined the Inquisition.’

‘The Inquisition?’ The Prince looked horrified. ‘Why on earth would a man give up the soldiering life for that?’

West groped for words, but then thought better of it. ‘I cannot imagine, your Highness.’

‘Joined the Inquisition! Well, I never.’ They rode in silence for a moment. Gradually, the Prince’s smile returned. ‘But we were talking of the honour of war, were we not?’

West grimaced. ‘We were, your Highness.’

‘First through the breach at Ulrioch, weren’t you? First through the breach, I heard! There’s honour for you, eh? There’s glory, isn’t it? That must have been quite an experience, eh, Colonel? Quite an experience!’

Struggling through a mass of broken stones and timbers, littered with twisted corpses. Half-blind with the smoke, half-choking on the dust, shrieks and wails and the clashing of metal coming at him from all around, hardly able to breathe for fear. Men pressing in on all sides, groaning, shoving, stumbling, yelling, running with blood and sweat, black with grime and soot, half-seen faces twisted with pain and fury. Devils, in hell.

West remembered screaming ‘Forward!’, over and over until his throat was raw, even though he had no idea which way forward was. He remembered stabbing someone with his sword, friend or enemy, he did not know, then or now. He remembered falling and cutting his head on a rock, tearing his jacket on a broken timber. Moments, fragments, as if from a story he once heard someone else telling.

West pulled his coat tighter round his chilly shoulders, wishing it was

thicker. 'Quite an experience, your Highness.'

'Damn shame that bloody Bethod won't be coming this way!' Prince Ladisla slashed petulantly at the air with his riding crop. 'Little better than damn guard duty! Does Burr take me for a fool, eh, West, does he?'

West took a deep breath. 'I couldn't possibly say, your Highness.'

The Prince's fickle mind had already moved off. 'What about those pets of yours? Those Northmen. The ones with the comical names. What's he called, that dirty fellow? Wolfman, is it?'

'Dogman.'

'Dogman, that's it! Capital!' The Prince chuckled to himself. 'And that other one, biggest damn fellow I ever saw! Excellent! What are they up to?'

'I sent them scouting north of the river, your Highness.' West rather wished he was with them. 'The enemy are probably far away, but if they aren't, we need to know about it.'

'Of course we do. Excellent idea. So that we can prepare to attack!'

A timely withdrawal and a fast messenger to Marshal Burr was more what West had in mind, but there was no point in saying so. Ladisla's whole notion of war was of ordering a glorious charge, then retiring to bed. Strategy and retreat were not words in his vocabulary.

'Yes,' the Prince was muttering to himself, eyes fixed intently on the trees beyond the river. 'Prepare an attack and sweep them back across the border . . .'

The border was a hundred leagues away. West seized his moment. 'Your Highness, if I may, there is a great deal for me to do.'

It was no lie. The camp had been organised, or disorganised, without a thought for convenience or defence. An unruly maze of ramshackle canvas in a great clearing near the river, where the ground was too soft and had soon been turned into a morass of sticky mud by the supply carts. At first there had been no latrines, then they had been dug too shallow and much too close to the camp, not far from where the provisions were being stored. Provisions which, incidentally, had been badly packed, inadequately prepared, and were already close to spoiling, attracting every rat in Angland. If it had not been for the cold, West did not doubt that the camp would already have been riddled with disease.

Prince Ladisla waved his hand. 'Of course, a great deal to do. You can tell me more of your stories tomorrow, eh, West? About Colonel Glokta and so forth. Damn shame he's dead!' he shouted over his shoulder as he cantered off towards his enormous purple tent, high up on the hill above the stink and confusion.

West turned his mount with some relief and urged it down the slope into the camp. He passed men tottering through the half-frozen sludge, shivering, breath steaming, hands wrapped in dirty rags. He passed men sitting in sorry groups before their patched tents, no two dressed the same, as close to meagre fires as they dared, fiddling with cooking pots, playing miserable games of damp cards, drinking and staring into the cold air.

The better-trained levies had gone with Poulder and Kroy to seek out the enemy. Ladisla had been left with the rump: those too weak to march well, too poorly equipped to fight well, too broken even to do nothing with any

conviction. Men who might never have left their homes in all their lives, forced to cross the sea to a land they knew nothing of, to fight an enemy they had no quarrel with, for reasons they did not understand.

Some few of them might have felt some trace of patriotic fervour, some swell of manly pride when they left, but by now the hard marching, the bad food and the cold weather had truly worn, starved, and frozen all enthusiasm out of them. Prince Ladisla was scarcely the inspirational leader to put it back, had he even been making the slightest effort to do so.

West looked down at those grim, tired, pinched faces as he rode past, and they stared back, beaten already. All they wanted was to go home, and West could hardly blame them. So did he.

‘Colonel West!’

There was a big man grinning over at him, a man with a thick beard, wearing the uniform of an officer in the King’s Own. West realised with a start that it was Jalenhorm. He slid down from his saddle and grabbed hold of the big man’s hand in both of his. It was good to see him. A firm, honest, trustworthy presence. A reminder of a past life, when West did not move among the great men of the world, and things were an awful lot simpler. ‘How are you, Jalenhorm?’

‘Alright, thank you, sir. Just taking a turn round the camp, waiting.’ The big man cupped his hands and blew into them, rubbed them together. ‘Trying to stay warm.’

‘That’s what war is, in my experience. A great deal of waiting, in unpleasant conditions. A great deal of waiting, with occasional moments of the most extreme terror.’

Jalenhorm gave a dry grin. ‘Something to look forward to then. How’re things on the Prince’s staff?’

West shook his head. ‘A competition to see who can be most arrogant, ignorant, and wasteful. How about you? How’s the camp life?’

‘We’re not so badly off. It’s some of these levies I feel sorry for. They’re not fit to fight. I heard a couple of the older ones died last night from the cold.’

‘It happens. Let’s just hope they bury them deep, and a good way from the rest of us.’ West could see that the big man thought him heartless, but there it was. Few of the casualties in Gurkhul had died in battle. Accidents, illness, little wounds gone bad. You came to expect it. As badly equipped as some of the levies were? They would be burying men every day. ‘Nothing you need?’

‘There is one thing. My horse dropped a shoe in this mud, and I tried to find someone to fit a new one.’ Jalenhorm spread his hands. ‘I could be wrong, but I don’t think there’s a smith in the whole camp.’

West stared at him. ‘Not one?’

‘I couldn’t find any. There are forges, anvils, hammers and all the rest but . . . no one to work them. I spoke to one of the quartermasters. He said General Poulder refused to release any of his smiths, and so did General Kroy, so, well,’ and Jalenhorm shrugged his shoulders, ‘we don’t have any.’

‘No one thought to check?’

‘Who?’

West felt the familiar headache tugging at the back of his eyes. Arrows need heads, blades need sharpening, armour and saddles and the carts that haul the

supplies break, and need to be repaired. An army with no smiths is little better than an army with no weapons. And here they were, out in the frozen country, miles from the nearest settlement. Unless . . .

‘We passed a penal colony on the way.’

Jalenhorm squinted as he tried to remember. ‘Yes, a foundry, I think. I saw smoke above the trees . . .’

‘They would have some skilled metal-workers.’

The big man’s eyebrows went up. ‘Some criminal metal-workers.’

‘I’ll take whatever we can get. Today your horse is short a shoe, tomorrow we might have nothing to fight with! Get a dozen men together, and a wagon. We’ll leave at once.’

The prison loomed up out of the trees through the cold rain, a fence of great, mossy logs tipped with bent and rusted spikes. A grim-looking place with a grim purpose. West swung from his saddle while Jalenhorm and his men reined up behind him, then squelched across the rutted track to the gate and hammered on the weathered wood with the pommel of his sword.

It took a while, but eventually a small hatch snapped open. A pair of grey eyes frowned at him through the slot. Grey eyes above a black mask. A Practical of the Inquisition.

‘My name is Colonel West.’

The eyes regarded him coldly. ‘So?’

‘I am in the service of Crown Prince Ladisla, and I need to speak to the commandant of this camp.’

‘Why?’

West frowned, doing his very best to look impressive with his hair plastered to his scalp and the rain dripping off his chin. ‘There is a war on and I do not have time to bandy words with you! I need to speak to the commandant most urgently!’

The eyes narrowed. They looked at West for a while, and then at the dozen bedraggled soldiers behind him. ‘Alright,’ said the Practical. ‘You can come in, but only you. The rest will have to wait.’

The main street was a stretch of churned-up mud between leaning shacks, water trickling from the eaves, spattering into the dirt. There were two men and a woman in the road, wet through, struggling to move a cart laden with stones, up to the axles in mush. All three had heavy chains on their ankles. Ragged, bony, hollow faces, as empty of hope as they were empty of food.

‘Get that fucking cart shifted,’ the Practical growled at them, and they stooped back to their unenviable task.

West struggled through the muck towards a stone building at the far end of the camp, trying to hop from one dry patch to another, without success. Another dour Practical was standing on the threshold, water running from a stained oilskin over his shoulders, hard eyes following West with a mixture of suspicion and indifference. He and his guide stepped past without a word and into the dim hall beyond, full of the noise of drumming rain. The Practical knocked at an ill-fitting door.

‘Come in.’

A small, spare room with grey walls, cold and smelling slightly of damp. A mean fire flickered in the grate, a sagging shelf was stacked with books. A portrait of the King of the Union stared regally down from one wall. A lean man in a black coat sat writing at a cheap desk. He looked at West for a while, then carefully put down his pen and rubbed at the bridge of his nose with an inky thumb and forefinger.

‘We have a visitor,’ grunted the Practical.

‘So I see. I am Inquisitor Lorsen, commandant of our little camp.’

West gave the bony hand the most perfunctory of squeezes. ‘Colonel West. I am here with Prince Ladisla’s army. We are camped a dozen miles to the north.’

‘Of course. How might I be of assistance to his Highness?’

‘We are desperately in need of skilled metal-workers. You run a foundry here, correct?’

‘A mine, a foundry, and a smithy for the manufacture of farming tools, but I fail to see what—’

‘Excellent. I will take a dozen or so men back with me, the most skilled men you have available.’

The commandant frowned. ‘Out of the question. The prisoners here are guilty of the most serious crimes. They cannot be released without a signed order from the Arch Lector himself.’

‘Then we have a problem, Inquisitor Lorsen. I have ten thousand men with weapons that need sharpening, armour that needs mending, horses that need shoeing. We might be called into action at any moment. I cannot wait for orders from the Arch Lector or anyone else. I must leave with smiths, and there it is.’

‘But you must understand that I cannot allow—’

‘You fail to realise the gravity of the situation!’ barked West, his temper already fraying. ‘By all means send a letter to the Arch Lector! I will send a man back to my camp for a company of soldiers! We can see who gets help first!’

The commandant thought about that for a while. ‘Very well,’ he said eventually, ‘follow me.’

Two dirty children stared at West from the porch of one of the shacks as he stepped out of the commandant’s building, back into the incessant drizzle.

‘You have children here?’

‘We have whole families, if they are judged a danger to the state.’ Lorsen glanced sideways at him. ‘A shame, but holding the Union together has always required harsh measures. I gather from your silence that you disapprove.’

West watched one of the shabby children limping through the muck, doomed, perhaps, to spend their whole life in this place. ‘I think it’s a crime.’

The commandant shrugged. ‘Don’t deceive yourself. Everyone is guilty of something, and even the innocent can be a threat. Perhaps it takes small crimes to prevent bigger ones, Colonel West, but it’s up to bigger men than us to decide. I only make sure they work hard, don’t prey upon each other, and don’t escape.’

‘You only do your job, eh? A well-trodden way to avoid responsibility.’

‘Which of us is it who lives among them, out here in the middle of

nowhere? Which of us is it who watches over them, dresses them, feeds them, cleans them, fights the endless, pointless war against their damn lice? Is it you who stops them beating, and raping, and killing each other? You're an officer in the King's Own, eh, Colonel? So you live in Adua? In fine quarters in the Agriont, among the rich and well groomed?' West frowned, and Lorsen chuckled at him. 'Which of us has truly avoided the responsibility, as you put it? My conscience has never been cleaner. Hate us if you like, we're used to it. No one likes to shake hands with the man who empties the latrine pits either, but pits have to be emptied all the same. Otherwise the world fills up with shit. You can have your dozen smiths, but don't try to take the high ground with me. There is no high ground here.'

West didn't like it, but he had to admit the man made a good case, so he set his jaw and struggled on in silence, head down. They squelched towards a long, windowless, stone-built shed, thick smoke roiling up into the misty air from tall chimneys at each corner. The Practical slid back the bolt on the heavy door and heaved it open, and West followed him and Lorsen into the darkness.

The heat was like a slap in the face after the freezing air outside. Acrid smoke stung at West's eyes, nipped at his throat. The din in the narrow space was frightening. Bellows creaked and wheezed, hammers clanged on anvils sending up showers of angry sparks, red hot metal hissed furiously in water barrels. There were men everywhere, packed in tight together, sweating, and groaning, and coughing, hollow faces half lit by the orange glow from the forges. Devils, in hell.

'Stop your work!' roared Lorsen. 'Stop and form up!'

The men slowly set down their tools, lurched and stumbled and rattled forward to form a line while four or five Practicals looked on from the shadows. A shabby, broken, stooping, sorrowful line. A couple of the men had irons on their wrists as well as their ankles. They scarcely looked like the answer to all of West's problems, but he had no choice. This was all there was.

'We have a visitor, from outside. Say your piece, Colonel.'

'My name is Colonel West,' he croaked, voice cracking on the stinging air. 'There are ten thousand soldiers camped a dozen miles down the road, under Crown Prince Ladisla. We have need of smiths.' West cleared his throat, tried to speak louder without coughing his lungs out. 'Who among you can work metals?'

No one spoke. The men stared at their threadbare shoes or their bare feet, with the odd sidelong glance at the glowering Practicals.

'You need not be afraid. Who can work metals?'

'I can, sir.' A man stepped forward from the line, the irons on his ankles rattling. He was lean and sinewy, slightly stooped. As the lamplight fell across his head West found himself wincing. He was disfigured by hideous burns. One side of his face was a mass of livid, slightly melted-looking scars, no eyebrow, scalp patchy with pink bald spots. The other side was little better. The man scarcely had a face at all. 'I can work a forge, and I did some soldiering too, in Gurkhul.'

'Good,' muttered West, doing his best to swallow his horror at the man's appearance. 'Your name?'

‘Pike.’

‘Are any of these others good with metal, Pike?’

The burned man shuffled and clanked his way down the line, pulling men forward by their shoulders while the commandant looked on, his frown growing deeper with every passing moment.

West licked his dry lips. Hard to believe that in so little time he could have gone from so horribly cold to so horribly hot, but here he was, more uncomfortable than ever. ‘I’ll need keys to their irons, Inquisitor.’

‘There are no keys. The irons are melted shut. They are not intended ever to be removed and I would strongly advise you not to. Many of these prisoners are extremely dangerous, and you should bear in mind that you will be returning them to us as soon as you can make alternative arrangements. The Inquisition is not in the business of early releases.’ He stalked off to speak to one of the Practicals.

Pike sidled up, pulling another convict by the elbow. ‘Pardon me, sir,’ he murmured, growling voice kept low. ‘But could you find a place for my daughter?’

West shrugged his shoulders, uncomfortable. He would have liked to take everyone and burn the damn place to the ground, but he was already pushing his luck. ‘It’s not a good idea, a woman in amongst all those soldiers. Not a good idea at all.’

‘A better idea than staying here, sir. I can’t leave her on her own. She can help me at the forge. She can swing a hammer herself if it comes to that. She’s strong.’

She didn’t look strong. She looked skinny and ragged, bony face smeared with soot and grease. West could have taken her for a boy. ‘I’m sorry, Pike, but it’s no easy ride where we’re going.’

She grabbed hold of West’s arm as he turned away. ‘It’s no easy ride here.’ Her voice was a surprise. Soft, smooth, educated. ‘Cathil is my name. I can work.’ West looked down at her, ready to shake his arm free, but her expression reminded him of something. Painless. Fearless. Empty eyes, flat, like a corpse.

Ardee. Blood smeared across her cheek.

West grimaced. The memory was like a wound that wouldn’t heal. The heat was unbearable, every part of him was twitching with discomfort, his uniform like sandpaper against his clammy skin. He had to get out of this horrible place.

He looked away, his eyes stinging. ‘Her too,’ he barked.

Lorsen snorted. ‘Are you joking, Colonel?’

‘Believe me, I’m not in a joking mood.’

‘Skilled men is one thing. I daresay you need them, but I cannot allow you to simply take whatever prisoners catch your eye—’

West turned on him with a snarl, his patience worn right through. ‘Her too, I said!’

If the commandant was impressed by West’s fury, he didn’t show it. They stood there for a long moment, staring at each other, while the sweat ran down West’s face and the blood pounded loud in his temples.

Then Lorsen nodded slowly. ‘Her too. Very well. I cannot stop you.’ He

leaned in a little closer. 'But the Arch Lector will hear about this. He is far away, and it might take time for him to hear, but hear he will.' Even closer yet, almost whispering in West's ear. 'Perhaps one day you will find yourself visiting us again, but this time to stay. Perhaps, in the meantime, you should prepare your little lecture on the rights and wrongs of penal colonies. There'll be plenty of time for it.' Lorsen turned away. 'Now take my prisoners and go. I have a letter to write.'

Rain

Jeza! had always found a good storm a thorough amusement. Raindrops lashing at the streets, and walls, and roofs of the Agriont, hissing from the gutters. Something to be smiled out at through the wet window while one sat, warm and dry in one's quarters. Something that took the young ladies in the park by surprise and made them squeal, sticking their dresses excitingly to their clammy skin. Something to be dashed through, laughing with one's friends, as one made one's way from tavern to tavern, before drying out before a roaring fire with a mug of hot spiced wine. Jeza! used to enjoy the rain almost as much as the sun.

But that was before.

Out here on the plains, storms were of a different stamp. This was no petulant child's tantrum, best ignored and soon ended. This was a cold and murderous, merciless and grudge-bearing, bitter and relentless fury of a storm, and somehow it made all the difference that the nearest roof, let alone the nearest tavern, was hundreds of miles behind them. The rain came down in sheets, dousing the endless plain and everything on it with icy water. The fat drops stung at Jeza!'s scalp like sling-stones, nipped at his exposed hands, the tops of his ears, the back of his neck. Water trickled through his hair, through his eyebrows, down his face in rivulets and into his sodden collar. The rain was a grey curtain across the land, obliterating anything more than a hundred strides ahead, although out here of course, there was nothing ahead or anywhere else.

Jeza! shivered and clutched the collars of his coat together with one hand. A pointless gesture, he was already soaked to his skin. Damn shopkeeper back in Adua had assured him that this coat was entirely waterproof. It had certainly cost him enough, and he had looked very well in it in the shop, quite the rugged outdoorsman, but the seams had begun to leak almost as soon as the first drops fell. For some hours now he had been every bit as wet as if he had climbed into the bath with his clothes on, and a good deal colder.

His boots were full of icy water, his thighs were chafed ragged against his wet trousers, the waterlogged saddle creaked and squelched with every movement of his unhappy horse. His nose was running, his nostrils and his lips were sore, the very reins were painful in his wet palms. His nipples in particular were two points of agony in a sea of discomfort. The whole business was utterly unbearable.

'When will it end?' he muttered bitterly to himself, hunching his shoulders and looking up beseechingly at the gloomy heavens, the rain pattering on his face, in his mouth, in his eyes. Happiness seemed at that moment to consist of nothing more than a dry shirt. 'Can't you do something?' he moaned at Bayaz.

'Like what?' the Magus snapped back at him, water coursing down his face and dripping from his bedraggled beard. 'You think that I'm enjoying this?

Out on the great plain in a bastard of a storm at my age? The skies make no special dispensation for Magi, boy, they piss on everyone the same. I suggest you adjust to it and keep your whining to yourself. A great leader must share the hardships of his followers, of his soldiers, of his subjects. That is how he wins their respect. Great leaders do not complain. Not ever.'

'Fuck them then,' muttered Jezal under his breath. 'And this rain, too!'

'You call this rain?' Ninefingers rode past him, a big smile spread across his ugly lump of a face. Not long after the drops began to come down hard, Jezal had been most surprised to see the Northman shrug off first his battered coat, and then his shirt, roll them up in an oilskin and ride on stripped to the waist, heedless of the water running down his great slab of scarred back, happy as a great hog wallowing in the mud.

Such behaviour had, at first, struck Jezal as another unforgivable display of savagery, and he had only thanked his stars that the primitive had deigned to keep his trousers on, but as the cold rain began to seep through his coat he had become less sure. It would have been impossible for him to be any colder or wetter without his clothes, but at least he would have been free of the endless, horrible chafing of wet cloth. Ninefingers grinned over at him as though he could read his thoughts. 'Nothing but a drizzle. The sun can't always shine. You have to be realistic!'

Jezal ground his teeth. If he was told to be realistic one more time he would stab Ninefingers with his short steel. Damn half-naked brute. It was bad enough that he had to ride, and eat, and sleep within a hundred strides of a cave-dweller like that, but that he had to listen to his fool advice was an insult almost too deep to bear.

'Damn useless primitive,' he muttered to himself.

'If it comes to a fight I reckon you'll be glad to have him along.' Quai was looking sideways at Jezal, swaying back and forth on the seat of his creaking cart, long hair plastered to his gaunt cheeks by the rain, looking more pale and sickly than ever with a sheen of wet on his white skin.

'Who asked your opinion?'

'A man who doesn't want opinions should keep his own mouth shut.' The apprentice nodded his dripping head at Ninefingers' back. 'That there is the Bloody-Nine, the most feared man in the North. He's killed more men than the plague.' Jezal frowned over at the Northman, sitting sloppy in his saddle, thought about it for a moment, and sneered.

'Doesn't scare me any,' he said, as loud as he could without Ninefingers actually hearing him.

Quai snorted. 'I'll bet you've never even drawn a blade in anger.'

'I could start now,' growled Jezal, giving his most threatening frown.

'Very fierce,' chuckled the apprentice, disappointingly unimpressed. 'But if you're asking me who's the useless one here, well, I know who I'd rather have left behind.'

'Why, you—'

Jezal jumped in his saddle as a bright flash lit the sky, and then another, frighteningly close. Fingers of light clawed at the bulging undersides of the clouds, snaked through the darkness overhead. Long thunder rolled out across the gloomy plain, popped and crackled under the wind. By the time it faded

the wet cart had already rolled away, robbing Jezal of his chance to retort. 'Damn idiot apprentice,' he murmured, frowning at the back of his head.

At first, when the flashes had come, Jezal had tried to keep his spirits up by imagining his companions struck down by lightning. It would have been oddly appropriate, for instance, had Bayaz been cooked to a cinder by a stroke from the heavens. Jezal soon despaired of any such deliverance, however, even as a fantasy. The lightning would never kill more than one of them in a day, and if one of them had to go, he had slowly begun to hope it might be him. A moment of brilliant illumination, then sweet oblivion. The kindest escape from this nightmare.

A trickle of water ran down Jezal's back, tickling at his raw skin. He longed to scratch it, but he knew that if he did he would only create ten more itches, spread across his shoulder blades and his neck and all the places hardest to reach with a hooked finger. He closed his eyes, and his head slowly drooped under the weight of his desperation until his wet chin hung against his wet chest.

It had been raining the last time he saw her. He remembered it all with a painful clarity. The bruise on her face, the colour of her eyes, the set of her mouth, one side twisted up. Just thinking of it made him have to swallow that familiar lump in his throat. The lump he swallowed twenty times a day. First thing in the morning, when he woke, and last thing at night, as he lay on the hard ground. To be back with Ardee now, safe and warm, seemed like the realisation of all his dreams.

He wondered how long she might wait, as the weeks dragged on, and she received no word. Might she even now be writing daily letters to Angland that he would never receive? Letters expressing her tender feelings. Letters desperately seeking news. Letters begging for replies. Now her worst expectations would all be confirmed. That he was a faithless ass, and a liar, and had forgotten all about her, when nothing could have been further from the truth. He ground his teeth in frustration and despair at the thought, but what could he do? Replies were hard to send from a blighted, blasted, ruined wasteland, even supposing he could have written one in this epic downpour. He inwardly cursed the names of Bayaz and Ninefingers, of Longfoot and Quai. He cursed the Old Empire and he cursed the endless plain. He cursed the whole demented expedition. It was becoming an hourly ritual.

Jezal began to perceive, dimly, that he had until now had rather an easy life. It seemed strange that he had moaned so long and hard about rising early to fence, or about lowering himself to play cards with Lieutenant Brint, or about how his sausages were always a touch overdone of a morning. He should have been laughing, bright-eyed and with a spring in his step, simply to have been out of the rain. He coughed, and sniffed, and wiped at his sore nose with his sore hand. At least with so much water around, no one would notice him weeping.

Only Ferro looked as if she was enjoying herself even less than him, occasionally glaring at the pissing clouds, her face wrinkled up with hatred and horror. Her spiky hair was plastered flat to her skull, her waterlogged clothes hung limp from her scrawny shoulders, water ran down her scarred face and dripped from the end of her sharp nose, the point of her sharp chin.

She looked like a mean-tempered cat dunked unexpectedly in a pond, its body suddenly seeming a quarter of the size it had been, stripped of all its air of menace. Perhaps a woman's voice might be the thing to lift him from this state of mind, and Ferro was the nearest thing to a woman within a hundred miles.

He spurred his horse up alongside her, doing his best to smile, and she turned her scowl on him. Jezal found to his discomfort that at close quarters, much of the menace returned. He had forgotten about those eyes. Yellow eyes, sharp as knives, pupils small as pin-pricks, strange and disconcerting. He wished he had never approached her now, but he could hardly go without saying something.

'Bet it doesn't rain much where you come from, eh?'

'Are you going to shut your fucking hole, or do I have to hurt you?'

Jezal cleared his throat, and quietly allowed his mount to drop back away from her. 'Crazy bitch,' he whispered under his breath. Damn her, then, she could keep her misery. He wasn't about to start wallowing in self-pity. That wasn't his way at all.

The rain had finally stopped when they came upon the place, but the air was still full of heavy damp, the sky above was still full of strange colours. The evening sun pierced the swirling clouds with pink and orange, casting an eerie glow over the grey plain.

Two empty carts stood upright, another was tipped up on its side, one wheel broken off, a dead horse still tethered to it, lying with its pink tongue lolling out of its mouth, a pair of broken arrows sticking from its bloody side. The corpses were scattered all around in the flattened grass, like dolls discarded by a bad-tempered child. Some had deep wounds, or limbs broken, or arrows poking from their bodies. One had an arm off at the shoulder, a short length of snapped bone sticking out as if from a butcher's joint.

Rubbish was scattered all around them. Broken weapons, splintered wood. A few trunks smashed open, rolls of cloth ripped out and slashed across the wet ground. Burst barrels, shattered boxes, rooted through and looted.

'Merchants,' grunted Ninefingers, looking down. 'Like we're pretending to be. Life's cheap out here alright.'

Ferro curled her lip. 'Where isn't it?'

The wind whipped cold across the plain, cutting clean through Jezal's damp clothes. He had never seen a corpse before, and here were laid out . . . how many? At least a dozen. He started to feel slightly peculiar halfway through counting them.

No one else seemed much moved, though familiarity with violence was hardly surprising among these characters. Ferro was crawling around the bodies, peering down and prodding them with as little emotion as an undertaker. Ninefingers looked as though he had seen far worse, which Jezal did not doubt he had, and done far worse besides. Bayaz and Longfoot both looked mildly troubled, but not much more so than if they had come upon some unknown horse tracks. Quai scarcely even looked interested.

Jezal could have done with a share of their indifference at that moment. He would not have admitted it, but he was feeling more than a little sick. That

skin: slack, and still, and waxy pale, beaded with wet from the rain. That clothing: ripped and rifled through, missing boots, or coats, or shirts even. Those wounds. Ragged red lines, blue and black bruises, rips and tears and gaping mouths in flesh.

Jezal turned suddenly in his saddle, looking behind, to the left, to the right, but every view was the same. Nowhere to run to, if he had even known in what direction the nearest settlement lay. In a group of six and yet he felt utterly alone. In a vast, open space, and yet he felt utterly trapped.

One of the corpses seemed to be staring, unnervingly, straight at him. A young man, no more than Jezal's age, with sandy hair and protruding ears. He could have done with a shave, except, of course, that it hardly mattered now. There was a yawning red gash across his belly, his bloody hands lying on either side of it, as though trying to squeeze it shut. His guts glistened wetly inside, all purple-red. Jezal felt his gorge rising. He was already feeling faint from eating too little that morning. Damn sick of dry biscuit, and he could hardly force down the slops the others put together. He turned away from the sickening scene and stared down at the grass, pretending to be searching for important clues while his stomach clenched and heaved.

He gripped his reins as tightly as he could, forcing down the spit as it rushed into his mouth. He was a proud son of the Union, damn it. What was more he was a nobleman, of a distinguished family. What was still more he was a bold officer of the King's Own, and a winner of the Contest. To vomit at the sight of a little gore would be to disgrace himself before this mixture of fools and primitives, and that could under no circumstances be permitted. The honour of his nation was at stake. He glared fixedly at the wet ground, and he clamped his teeth shut, and he ordered his stomach to be still. Gradually, it began to work. He sucked in deep breaths through his nose. Cool, damp, calming air. He was in complete control. He looked back at the others.

Ferro was squatting on the ground with her hand in one of the victim's gaping wounds as far almost as her wrist. 'Cold,' she snapped at Ninefingers, 'been dead since this morning at least.' She pulled her hand out, fingers slimy with gore.

Jezal had belched half his meagre breakfast down his coat before he had time even to slide out of his saddle. He staggered a couple of drunkard's steps, took a gasping breath and retched again. He bent over, hands on his knees, head spinning, spitting bile out onto the grass.

'You alright?'

Jezal glanced up, doing his best to look nonchalant with a long string of bitter drool hanging from his face. 'Something I ate,' he muttered, wiping at his nose and mouth with his trembling hand. A pitiful ruse, he had to admit.

Ninefingers only nodded, though. 'That meat this morning, most likely. I been feeling sick myself.' He gave one of his revolting smiles and offered Jezal a water skin. 'Best keep drinking. Flush it away, uh?'

Jezal sloshed a mouthful of water round his mouth and spat it out, watching Ninefingers walk back to the bodies, and frowning. That had been strange. Coming from another source it might have seemed almost a generous gesture. He took another swig of water, and began to feel better. He made, somewhat unsteadily, for his horse, and clambered back into the saddle.

'Whoever did it was well armed, and in numbers,' Ferro was saying. 'The grass is full of tracks.'

'We should be careful,' said Jezal, hoping to impose himself on the conversation.

Bayaz turned sharply to look at him. 'We should always be careful! That goes without saying! How far are we from Darmium?'

Longfoot squinted up at the sky, then out across the plain. He licked his finger and held it up to the wind. 'Even for a man of my talents, it is hard to be accurate without the stars. Fifty miles or thereabouts.'

'We'll need to turn off the track soon.'

'We are not crossing the river at Darmium?'

'The city is in chaos. Cabrian holds it, and admits no one. We cannot take the risk.'

'Very well. Aostum it is. We will take a wide route round Darmium and off westward. A slightly longer path but—'

'No.'

'No?'

'The bridge at Aostum lies in ruins.'

Longfoot frowned. 'Gone, eh? Truly, God loves to test his faithful. We may have to ford the Aos then—'

'No,' said Bayaz. 'The rains have been heavy and the great river is deep. The fords are all closed to us.'

The Navigator looked puzzled. 'You, of course, are my employer, and as a proud member of the order of Navigators I will always do my utmost to obey, but I am afraid that I can see no other way. If we cannot cross at Darmium, or at Aostum, and we cannot ford the river . . .'

'There is one other bridge.'

'There is?' Longfoot looked baffled for a moment, then his eyes suddenly widened. 'You cannot mean—'

'The bridge at Aulcus still stands.'

Everyone glanced at each other for a moment, frowning. 'I thought you said the place was a ruin,' said Ninefingers.

'A shattered graveyard, I heard,' murmured Ferro.

'I thought you said no one goes within miles of the place.'

'It would hardly have been my first choice, but there are no others. We will join the river and follow the northern bank to Aulcus.' Nobody moved. Longfoot in particular had a look of stunned horror on his face. 'Now!' snapped Bayaz. 'It is plainly not safe to remain here.' And with that he turned his horse away from the corpses. Quai shrugged and flicked his reigns and the cart grumbled off through the grass after the First of the Magi. Longfoot and Ninefingers followed behind, all frowns and foreboding.

Jezal stared at the bodies, still lying where they had found them, their eyes staring accusingly up into the darkening sky. 'Shouldn't we bury them?'

'If you like,' grunted Ferro, springing up into the saddle in one easy motion. 'Maybe you could bury them in puke.'

Bloody Company

Riding, that was what they were doing. That was what they'd been doing for days. Riding, looking for Bethod, with winter coming on. Bog and forest, hill and valley. Rain and sleet, fog and snow. Looking for signs that he was coming their way, and knowing that there wouldn't be any. A lot of wasted time, to the Dogman's mind, but once you've been fool enough to ask for a task, you better do the one you're given.

'Stupid bloody job, this,' snarled Dow, wincing and twitching and fussing with his reins. He'd never been too much of a one for horseback. Liked to keep his feet on the ground and pointed at the enemy. 'Waste of our fucking time. How d'you put up with scouting, Dogman? Stupid bloody job!'

'Someone's got to get it done, don't they? Least I got a horse now.'

'Well I'm right delighted for you!' he sneered. 'You got a horse!'

The Dogman shrugged his shoulders. 'Better than walking.' 'Better than walking, eh?' scoffed Dow. 'That just binds it all up!'

'I got new breeches and all. Not to mention good woollens. The wind don't blow half so cold round my fruits no more.'

That got a chuckle from Tul, but it seemed Dow wasn't in a laughing mood. 'Wind round your fruits? By the fucking dead, boy, is this what we're come to? You forgotten who you are? You was Ninefingers' closest! You came over the mountains with him in the first place! You're in all them songs along with him! You scouted at the head of armies. A thousand men, all following your say-so!'

'That didn't turn out too happy for anyone concerned,' muttered Dogman, but Dow was already laying into Tul.

'And how about you, big man? Tul Duru Thunderhead, strongest bastard in the North. Wrestled bears and won, I heard. Held the pass all alone, while your clan got clean away. A giant, they say, ten feet tall, born under a storm, and with a belly full o' thunder. What about it, giant? The only thunder I've heard you make lately is when you take a shit!'

'What of it?' snarled Tul. 'You any different? Men used to whisper your name, scared to speak it out loud. They'd grip their weapons tight and stick close by the fire if they thought you was within ten leagues! Black Dow, they used to say, quiet and cunning and ruthless as the wolf! He's killed more men than winter, and he's got less pity in him! Who cares a shit now, eh? Times have changed, and you rolled just as far downhill as the rest of us!'

Dow only smiled. 'That's my point, big lad, that's just my point. We used to be something, each one of us. Named Men. Known men. Feared men. I remember my brother telling me that there ain't no better man than Harding Grim with bow nor blade, no better man in all the North. Steadiest damn hand in the whole Circle of the World! How about that, eh, Grim?'

'Uh,' said Grim.

Dow nodded his head. 'Exactly what I'm saying. Now look at us. We ain't so much rolled downhill as fell off a bloody cliff! Running errands for these Southerners? These fucking women in men's trousers? These damn salad-eaters with their big words and their thin little swords?'

Dogman shifted in his saddle, uncomfortable. 'That West knows what he's about.'

'That West!' sneered Dow. 'He knows his arse from his mouth, and in that he's a damn stretch better than the rest, but he's soft as pig fat, and you know it. Got no bones in him at all! None of 'em have! I'd be shocked to my roots if the better part of 'em have ever seen a skirmish. You reckon they'd stand a charge from Bethod's Carls?' He snorted hard laughter to himself. 'Now there's a joke!'

'It can't be denied they're a piss-weak crowd,' muttered Tul, and the Dogman couldn't very well disagree. 'Half of 'em are too hungry to lift a weapon, let alone swing one with some fire, if they could even work out how. All the good ones went north to fight Bethod, leaving us here with the scrapings from the pot.'

'Scrapings from a piss-pot, I'm thinking. What about you, Threetrees?' called Dow. 'The Rock of Uffrith, eh? You were the spike up Bethod's arse for six months, a hero to every right-thinking man in the North! Rudd Threetrees! There's a man carved out of stone! There's a man who never backs down! You want honour? You want dignity? You want to know what a man should be? Look no fucking further! What do you make of all this, eh? Running errands! Checking these bogs for Bethod where we all know he ain't! Work fit for boys and we're lucky to get it, I suppose?'

Threetrees pulled up his horse and turned it slowly round. He sat in his saddle, hunched up, tired looking, and he stared at Dow for a minute. 'Open your ears and listen for once,' he said, 'cause I don't want to be telling you this every mile we go. The world ain't how I'd like it in all kind o' ways. Ninefingers has gone back to the mud. Bethod's made himself King of the Northmen. The Shanka are fixing to come swarming over the mountains. I've walked too far, and fought too long, and heard enough shit from you to fill a lifetime, and all at an age when I should have my feet up with sons to take care o' me. So you can see I got bigger problems than that life hasn't turned out the way you hoped. You can harp on the past all you please, Dow, like some old woman upset cause her tits used to stay up by themselves, or you can shut your fucking hole and help me get on with things.'

He gave each one of 'em a look in the eye, and the Dogman felt a touch shamed for doubting him. 'As for checking for Bethod where he ain't, well, Bethod's never been one to turn up where he's supposed to be. Scouting's the task we've been given, and scouting's the task I mean to get done.' He leaned forward in his saddle. 'So how's this for a fucking formula? Mouth shut. Eyes open.' And he turned and nudged his horse on through the trees.

Dow took a deep breath. 'Fair enough, chief, fair enough. It's just a shame is all. That's what I'm saying. Just a shame.'

'There's three of 'em,' said Dogman. 'Northmen, for certain, but hard to tell

their clan. Being as they're down here, I'm guessing they follow Bethod.'

'More 'n likely,' said Tul. 'Seems that's the fashion these days.'

'Just three?' asked Threetrees. 'No reason for Bethod to have three men on their own all the way out here. Must be more nearby.'

'Let's deal with the three,' growled Dow, 'and get to the rest later. I came here to fight.'

'You came here 'cause I dragged you here,' snapped Threetrees. 'You was all for turning back an hour ago.'

'Uh,' said Grim.

'We can get around 'em if we need to.' Dogman pointed through the cold woods. 'They're up on the slope there, in the trees. No trouble to get around 'em.'

Threetrees looked up at the sky, pink and grey through the branches, and shook his head. 'No. We're losing the light, and I wouldn't like leaving 'em behind us in the dark. Since we're here, and since they're here, we'd best deal with 'em. Weapons it is.' He squatted down, talking quiet. 'Here's how we'll do it. Dogman, get round and above, up on that slope there. Take the one on the left when you hear the signal. You follow me? The one on the left. And best not to miss.'

'Aye,' said Dogman, 'on the left.' Not missing more or less went without saying.

'Dow, you slide in quiet and take the middle.'

'The middle,' growled Dow. 'He's done.'

'That leaves one for you, Grim.' Grim nodded without looking up, rubbing at his bow with a rag. 'Nice and clean, boys. I don't want to be putting one o' you in the mud over this. Places, then.'

The Dogman found a good spot up above Bethod's three scouts and watched from behind a tree trunk. Seemed like he'd done this a hundred times, but it never got any easier on the nerves. Probably just as well. It's when it gets easy that a man makes mistakes.

Dogman was watching for him, so he just caught sight of Dow in the fading light, slithering up through the brush, eyes fixed ahead on his task. He was getting close now, real close. Dogman nocked an arrow and took an aim at the one on the left, breathing slow to keep his hands steady. It was then that he realised. Now he was on the other side, the one that had been on the left was on the right. So which one should he shoot?

He cursed to himself, struggling to remember what Threetrees said. Get around and take the one on the left. Worst thing of all would have been to do nothing, so he aimed up at the one on his left and hoped for the best.

He heard Threetrees call from down below, sounding like a bird out in the woods. Dow gathered himself to jump. Dogman let his arrow fly. It thudded into the back of his task just as Grim's arrow stuck him in the front, and Dow seized hold of the middle one and stabbed him from behind. That left one of 'em untouched, and very surprised-looking.

'Shit,' whispered the Dogman.

'Help!' screamed the last of 'em, before Dow jumped on him. They rolled in the leaves, grunting and thrashing. Dow's arm went up and down – once, twice, three times, then he stood up, glaring through the trees and looking

mighty annoyed. Dogman was just shrugging his shoulders when he heard a voice behind him.

‘What?’

Dogman froze, cold all over. Another one, out in the bushes, not ten strides away. He reached for an arrow and nocked it, real quiet, then turned slowly round. He saw two of ‘em, and they saw him, and his mouth went sour as old beer. They all stared. Dogman aimed at the bigger one and pulled the string right back.

‘No!’ he shouted. The arrow thudded into his chest and he groaned and stumbled, fell down on his knees. Dogman dropped his bow and made a snatch at his knife, but he hadn’t got it drawn before the other one was on him. They went down hard in the brush, and started rolling.

Light, dark, light, dark. Over and over they went, down the slope, kicking and tearing and punching at each other. Dogman’s head smacked against something and he was down on his back, wrestling with this bastard. They hissed at each other, not words exactly, sounds like dogs make fighting. The man pulled his hand free and got a blade out from somewhere and Dogman caught his wrist before he could stab it home.

He was pushing down with all his weight, both hands on the knife. Dogman was pushing the other way, both hands on his wrists, hard as he could, but not hard enough. The blade was coming down slowly, down towards Dogman’s face. He was staring at it cross-eyed, a tooth of bright metal not a foot from his nose.

‘Die, you fucker!’ and it came down another inch. The Dogman’s shoulders, his arms, his hands were burning, running out of strength. Staring at his face. Stubble on his chin, yellow teeth, pock marks on his bent nose, hair hanging down around it. The point of the blade nudged closer. Dogman was dead, and there was no help for it.

Snick.

And his head wasn’t there any more. Blood washed over Dogman’s face, hot and sticky and reeking. The corpse went slack and he shoved it away, blood in his eyes, blood up his nose, blood in his mouth. He staggered up, gasping and choking and spitting.

‘Alright, Dogman. You’re alright.’ Tul. Must’ve come up on them while they were struggling.

‘I’m still alive,’ Dogman whispered, the way Logen used to when a fight was done. ‘Still alive.’ By the dead, though, that had been a close thing.

‘They ain’t got too much in the way of gear,’ Dow was saying, poking round the campsite. Cookpot on the fire, weapons and such like, but not much food. Not enough to be all alone out there in the woods.

‘Scouts maybe,’ said Threetrees. ‘Outriders for some bigger band?’

‘Reckon they must be,’ said Dow.

Threetrees slapped his hand down on the Dogman’s shoulder. ‘You alright?’

He was still busy trying to rub the blood off his face. ‘Aye, I think so.’ Bit shaky still, but that would settle. ‘Cuts and scrapes, I reckon. Nothing I’ll die of.’

‘Good, ‘cause I can’t spare you. Why don’t you take a creep up through them trees and have a look-see, while we clear up this mess here? Find who these

bastards were scouting for.'

'Right enough,' said the Dogman, sucking in a big breath and blowing it out. 'Right enough.'

'Stupid bloody job, eh, Dow?' whispered Threetrees. 'Work fit for boys and we're lucky to get it? What do you say now?'

'Could be I made a mistake.'

'A big one,' said the Dogman.

There were a hundred fires burning down there on the dark slopes, a hundred fires and more. There were men down there too, it hardly needed saying. Thralls mostly, lightly armed, but plenty of Carls as well. Dogman could see the last light of the day glinting on their spear tips, and their shield-rims, and their mail coats, polished up and ready for a fight, clustered round close to the flapping standards of each clan's chieftain. Lots of standards. Twenty of 'em, or thirty even, at a quick count. The Dogman had never seen more than ten together before.

'Biggest army there's ever been out of the North,' he muttered.

'Aye,' said Threetrees. 'All fighting for Bethod, and not five days' ride from the Southerners.' He pointed down at one of the banners. 'That Littlebone's standard down there?'

'Aye,' growled Dow, and spat into the brush. 'That's his mark alright. I got scores with that bastard.'

'There's a world o' scores down there,' said Threetrees. 'That's Pale-as-Snow's banner, and Whitesides, and Crendel Goring's over by them rocks. That's some bloody company. Them as went over to Bethod near the beginning. All grown fat on it now, I reckon.'

'What about them ones?' asked the Dogman, pointing out at some that he didn't recognise – evil-looking signs, all leather and bones. Looked like hillmen's marks to him, maybe. 'That ain't Crummock-i-Phail's standard, is it?'

'Nah! He'd never have kneeled to Bethod or anyone else. That mad bastard'll still be up there in the mountains somewhere, calling to the moon and all the rest.'

'Less Bethod done for him,' grunted Dow.

Threetrees shook his head. 'Doubt it. Canny bastard, that Crummock. Been holding Bethod off for years, up in the High Places. He knows all the ways, they say.'

'Whose signs are they then?' asked Dogman.

'Don't know, could be some boys from out east, past the Crinna. There's some strange folk out that way. You know any o' them banners, Grim?'

'Aye,' said Grim, but that was all he said.

'Don't hardly matter whose signs they are,' muttered Dow, 'just look at the numbers of 'em. There's half the fucking North down there.'

'And the worst half,' said Dogman. He was looking at Bethod's sign, set up in the middle of the host. A red circle daubed on black hides, an acre of 'em, it looked like, big as a field, mounted on a tall pine trunk, flapping evil in the wind. Huge great thing. 'Wouldn't fancy carrying it,' he muttered.

Dow slithered over and leaned in close. 'Might be that we could sneak in

there in the dark,' he whispered. 'Might be we could sneak in and put a blade in Bethod.'

They all looked at each other. It was a terrible risk, but Dogman had no doubts it was worth the trying. Wasn't a one of them hadn't dreamed of sending Bethod back to the mud.

'Put a blade in him, the bastard,' muttered Tul, and he had a smile right across his face.

'Uh,' grunted Grim.

'That's a task worth doing,' hissed Dow. 'That's real work!'

Dogman nodded, looking down at all them fires. 'No doubt.' Noble work. Work for Named Men like them, or like they used to be, maybe. There'd be some songs about that, alright. Dogman's blood was rushing at the thought, skin prickling on his hands, but Threetrees was having none of it.

'No. We can't risk it. We got to go back and tell the Union. Tell 'em they got guests coming. Bad guests, and in numbers.' He tugged at his beard, and Dogman could tell he didn't like it, backing off. None of 'em did, but they knew he was right, even Dow. Chances were they'd never get to Bethod, and if they did they'd never get out.

'We got to go back,' said Dogman.

'Fair enough,' said Dow. 'We go back. Shame though.'

'Aye,' said Threetrees. 'Shame.'

Long Shadows

‘By the dead.’ Ferro said nothing, but for the first time since Logen met her, the scowl had slipped off. Her face was slack, mouth hanging slightly open. Luthar, on the other hand, was grinning like a fool.

‘You ever see anything like that?’ he shouted over the noise, pointing out at it with a trembling hand.

‘There is nothing else like that,’ said Bayaz.

Logen had to admit that he’d been wondering what all the fuss was about when it came to crossing a river. Some of the bigger ones in the North could be a problem, especially in the wrong season and with a lot of gear to carry. But if there was no bridge, you found a good ford, held your weapons over your head, and sloshed across. Might take a while for your boots to dry out, and you had to keep your eyes well opened for an ambush, but otherwise there was nothing much to fear from a river. Good place to fill your water-skin.

Filling your skin at the Aos would have been a dangerous business, at least without a hundred strides of rope.

Logen had once stood on the cliffs near Uffrith, and watched the waves crash against the rocks far below, the sea stretching away, grey and foaming out of sight. A dizzy, and a humbling, and a worrying place to stand. The feeling at the brink of the great river’s canyon was much the same, except that a quarter mile away or so another cliff rose up from the water. The far bank, if you could use the word about a towering rock face.

He shuffled up gingerly to the very edge, prodding at the soft ground with the toes of his boots, and peered over the brink. Not a good idea. The red earth overhung slightly, bound up with white grass roots, and then the jagged rocks dropped away, almost sheer. Where the frothing water slapped against them, far below, it sent great plumes of bright spray into the air, clouds of damp mist that Logen could almost feel on his face. Tufts of long grass clung to the cracks and the ledges, and birds flitted between them, hundreds of small white birds. Logen could just make out their twittering calls over the mighty rumble of the river.

He thought on being dropped into that thundering weight of dark water – sucked, and whirled, and ripped around like a leaf in the storm. He swallowed, and shuffled cautiously back from the edge, looking around for something to cling on to. He felt tiny, and weightless, as if a strong gust of wind might snatch him away. He could almost feel the water moving through his boots, the surging, rolling, unstoppable power of it, making the very earth tremble.

‘So you can see why a bridge might be such a good idea!’ shouted Bayaz in his ear.

‘How can you even build a bridge across that?’

‘At Aostum the river splits in three, and the canyon is much less deep. The Emperor’s architects built islands, and made their bridges of many small arches. Even so, it took them twelve years to build. The bridge at Darmium is the work of Kanedias himself, a gift to his brother Juvens when they were yet on good terms. It crosses the river in a single span. How he did it, none now can say.’ Bayaz turned for the horses. ‘Get the others, we should keep moving!’

Ferro was already walking back from the brink. ‘So much rain.’ She looked over her shoulder, frowned and shook her head.

‘Don’t get rivers like that where you come from, eh?’

‘Out in the Badlands, water is the most precious thing you can have. Men kill over a bottle of it.’

‘That’s where you were born? The Badlands?’ A strange name for a place, but it sounded about right for her.

‘There are no births in the Badlands, pink. Only deaths.’

‘Harsh land, eh? Where were you born, then?’

She scowled. ‘What do you care?’

‘Just trying to be friendly.’

‘Friends!’ she sneered, brushing past him towards the horses.

‘Why? You got so many out here you couldn’t use another?’

She stopped, half turned, and looked at him through narrowed eyes. ‘My friends don’t last, pink.’

‘Nor do mine, but I reckon I’ll take the risk if you will.’

‘Alright,’ she said, but there was nothing friendly in her face. ‘The Gurmish conquered my home when I was a child, and they took me for a slave. They took all the children.’

‘A slave?’

‘Yes, fool, a slave! Bought and sold like meat by the butcher! Owned by someone else, and they do as they please with you, like they would with a goat, or a dog, or the dirt in their gardens! That what you want to know, friend?’

Logen frowned. ‘We don’t have that custom in the North.’

‘Ssss,’ she hissed, lip curling with scorn. ‘Good for fucking you!’

The ruin loomed over them. A forest of shattered pillars, a maze of broken walls, the ground around it strewn with fallen blocks as long as a man was tall. Crumbling windows and empty doorways yawned like wounds. A ragged black outline, chopped out from the flying clouds like a giant row of broken teeth.

‘What city was this?’ asked Luthar.

‘No city,’ said Bayaz. ‘At the height of the Old Time, at the greatest extent of the Emperor’s power, this was his winter palace.’

‘All this?’ Logen squinted at the sprawling wreck. ‘One man’s house?’

‘And not even the whole year round. Most of the time, the court would stay in Aulus. In winter, when the cold snows swept down off the mountains, the Emperor would bring his retinue here. An army of guardsmen, of servants, of cooks, of officials, of princes, and children, and wives, making their way across the plain ahead of the cold winds, taking up residence here for three

short months in the echoing halls, the beautiful gardens, the gilded chambers.' Bayaz shook his bald head. 'In times long past, before the war, this place glittered like the sea beneath the rising sun.'

Luthar sniffed. 'So Glustrod tore it down, I suppose?'

'No. It was not in that war, but another that it fell, many years later. A war fought by my order, after the death of Juvens, against his eldest brother.'

'Kanedias,' muttered Quai, 'the Master Maker.'

'A war just as bitter, just as brutal, just as merciless as the one before. And even more was lost. Juvens and Kanedias both, in the end.'

'Not a happy family,' muttered Logen.

'No.' Bayaz frowned up at the mighty wreckage. 'With the death of the Maker, the last of the four sons of Euz, the Old Time ended. We are left only with the ruins, and the tombs, and the myths. Little men, kneeling in the long shadows of the past.'

Ferro stood up in her stirrups. 'There are riders,' she barked, staring off at the horizon. 'Forty or more.'

'Where?' snapped Bayaz, shading his eyes. 'I don't see anything.' Nor could Logen. Only the waving grass and the towering clouds.

Longfoot frowned. 'I see no riders, and I am blessed with perfect vision. Why, I have often been told that—'

'You want to wait until you see them,' hissed Ferro, 'or get off the road before they see us?'

'We'll head into the ruins,' snapped Bayaz over his shoulder. 'And wait for them to pass. Malacus! Turn the cart!'

The wreck of the winter palace was full of shadows, and stillness, and decay. The outsize ruins towered around them, all covered with old ivy and wet moss, streaked and crusted with the droppings of bird and bat. The animals had made the place their palace now. Birds sang from a thousand nests, high in the ancient masonry. Spiders had spun great glistening webs in leaning doorways, heavy with sparkling beads of dew. Tiny lizards sunned themselves in patches of light on the fallen blocks, swarming away as they came near. The rattling of the cart over the broken ground, the footfalls and the hoof beats echoed back from the slimy stones. Everywhere, water dripped, and ran, and plopped in hidden pools.

'Take this, pink.' Ferro slapped her sword into Logen's hands.

'Where are you going?'

'You wait down here, and stay out of sight.' She jerked her head upwards. 'I'll watch them from up there.'

As a boy, Logen had never been out of the trees round the village. As a young man he'd spent days in the High Places, testing himself against the mountains. At Heonan in the winter, the hillmen had held the high pass. Even Bethod had thought that there was no way round, but Logen had found a way up the frozen cliff and settled that score. He could see no way up here, though. Not without an hour or two to spare. Cliffs of leaning blocks heavy with dead creeper, crags of tottering stonework slick with moss, seeming to lean and tip as the clouds moved fast above.

'How the hell you planning to get up . . .'

She was already halfway up one of the pillars. She didn't so much climb as

swarm like an insect, hand over hand. She paused at the top for a moment, found a footing she liked, then sprang through the air, right over Logen's head, landed on the wall behind and scrambled up onto it, sending a shower of broken mortar down into his face. She squatted on the top and frowned down at him. 'Just try not to make too much noise!' she hissed, then was gone.

'Did you see . . .' muttered Logen, but the others had already moved further into the damp shadows, and he hurried after them, not wanting to be left alone in this overgrown graveyard. Quai had pulled his cart up further on, and was leaning against it beside the restless horses. The First of the Magi was kneeling near him in the weeds, rubbing at the lichen-crusting wall with his palms.

'Look at this,' snapped Bayaz as Logen tried to edge past. 'These carvings here. Masterpieces of the ancient world! Stories, and lessons, and warnings from history.' His thick fingers brushed gently at the scarred stone. 'We might be the first men to look upon these in centuries!'

'Mmm,' muttered Logen, puffing out his cheeks.

'Look here!' Bayaz gestured at the wall. 'Euz gives his gifts to his three oldest sons, while Glustrod looks on from the shadows. The birth of the three pure disciplines of magic. Some craftsmanship, eh?'

'Right.'

'And here,' grunted Bayaz, knocking some weeds away and shuffling along to the next mossy panel, 'Glustrod plans to destroy his brother's work.' He had to tear at a tangle of dead ivy to get at the one beyond. 'He breaks the First Law. He hears voices from the world below, you see? He summons devils and sends them against his enemies. And in this one,' he muttered, tugging at the weight of brown creeper, 'let me see now . . .'

'Glustrod digs,' muttered Quai. 'Who knows? In the next one he might even have found what he's looking for.'

'Hmm,' grumbled the First of the Magi, letting the ivy fall back across the wall. He glowered at his apprentice as he stood up, frowning. 'Perhaps, sometimes, the past is better left covered.'

Logen cleared his throat and edged away, ducked quickly under a leaning archway. The wide space beyond was filled with small, knotty trees, planted in rows, but long overgrown. Great weeds and nettles, brown and sagging rotten from the rain, stood almost waist high around the mossy walls.

'Perhaps I should not say it myself,' came Longfoot's cheerful voice, 'but it must be said! My talent for navigation stands alone! It rises above the skills of every other Navigator as the mountain rises over the deep valley!' Logen winced, but it was Bayaz' anger or Longfoot's bragging, and that was no choice at all.

'I have led us across the great plain to the river Aos, without a deviation of even a mile!' The Navigator beamed at Logen and Luthar, as though expecting an avalanche of praise. 'And without a single dangerous encounter, in a land reckoned among the most dangerous under the sun!' He frowned. 'Perhaps a quarter of our epic journey is now safely behind us. I am not sure that you appreciate the difficulty involved. Across the featureless plain, as autumn turns to winter, and without even the stars to reckon by!' He shook his head. 'Huh. Truly, the pinnacle of achievement is a lonely place.'

He turned away and wandered over to one of the trees. 'The lodgings are a little past their best, but at least the fruit trees are still in working order.' Longfoot plucked a green apple from a low hanging branch and began to shine it on his sleeve. 'Nothing like a fine apple, and from the Emperor's orchard, no less.' He grinned to himself. 'Strange, eh? How the plants outlast the greatest works of men.'

Luthar sat down on a fallen statue nearby, slid the longer of his two swords from its sheath and laid it across his knees. Steel glinted mirror-bright as he turned it over in his lap, frowned at it, licked a finger and scrubbed at some invisible blemish. He pulled out his whetstone, spat on it, and carefully set to work on the long, thin blade. The metal rang gently as the stone moved back and forward. It was soothing, somehow, that sound, that ritual, familiar from a thousand campfires of Logen's past.

'Must you?' asked Brother Longfoot. 'Sharpening, polishing, sharpening, polishing, morning and night, it makes my head hurt. It's not as if you've even made any use of them yet. Probably find when you need them that you've sharpened them away to nothing, eh?' He chuckled at his own joke. 'Where will you be then?'

Luthar didn't even bother to look up. 'Why don't you keep your mind on getting us across this damn plain, and leave the swords to those who know the difference?' Logen grinned to himself. An argument between the two most arrogant men he had ever met was well worth watching, in his opinion.

'Huh,' snorted Longfoot, 'show me someone who knows the difference and I'll happily never mention blades again.' He lifted the apple to his mouth, but before he could bite into it, his hand was empty. Luthar had moved almost too fast to follow, and speared it on the glinting point of his sword. 'Give me that back!'

Luthar stood up. 'Of course,' he tossed it off the end of the blade with a practised flick of his wrist. Before Longfoot's reaching hands could close around it, Luthar had snatched his short sword from its sheath and whipped it blurring through the air. The Navigator was left juggling with the two even halves for a moment before dropping them both in the dirt.

'Damn your showing off!' he snapped.

'We can't all have your modesty,' muttered Luthar. Logen chuckled to himself while Longfoot stomped back over to the tree, staring up into the branches for another apple.

'Nice trick,' he grunted, strolling through the weeds to where Luthar was sitting. 'You're quick with those needles.'

The young man gave a modest shrug. 'It has been remarked upon.'

'Mmm.' Stabbing an apple and stabbing a man were two different things, but quickness was some kind of start. Logen looked down at Ferro's sword, turned it over in his hands, then slid it out from its wooden sheath. It was a strange weapon to his mind, grip and blade both gently curved, thicker at the end than at the hilt, sharpened only down one edge, with scarcely any point on it at all. He swung it in the air a couple of times. Strange weight, more like an axe than a sword.

'Odd-looking thing,' muttered Luthar.

Logen checked the edge with his thumb. Rough-feeling, it dragged at the

skin. 'Sharp, though.'

'Don't you ever sharpen yours?'

Logen frowned. He reckoned he must have spent weeks of his life, all told, sharpening the weapons he'd carried. Every night, out on the trail, after the meal, men would sit and work at their gear, steel scraping on metal and stone, flashing in the light of the campfires. Sharpening, cleaning, polishing, tightening. His hair might have been caked with mud, his skin stiff with old sweat, his clothes riddled with lice, but his weapons had always gleamed like the new moon.

He took hold of the cold grip and pulled the sword that Bayaz had given him out of its stained scabbard. It looked a slow and ugly thing compared to Luthar's swords, and to Ferro's too, if it came to that. There was hardly any shine on the heavy grey blade at all. He turned it over in his hand. The single silver letter glinted near the hilt. The mark of Kanedias.

'Don't know why, but it doesn't need sharpening. I tried it to begin with, but all it did was wear down the stone.' Longfoot had hauled himself up into one of the trees, and was slithering along a thick branch towards an apple hanging out of reach near its end.

'If you ask me,' grunted the Navigator, 'the weapons suit their owners to the ground. Captain Luthar – flash and fine-looking but never used in combat. The woman Maljinn – sharp and vicious and worrying to look upon. The Northman Ninefingers – heavy, solid, slow and simple. Hah!' he chuckled, dragging himself slightly further down the limb. 'A most fitting metaphor! Juggling with words has always been but one among my many remarkable—'

Logen grunted as he swung the sword over his head. It bit through the branch where it met the trunk, clean through, almost to the other side. More than far enough that Longfoot's weight ripped through the rest, and brought the whole limb, Navigator and all, crashing down into the weeds below. 'Slow and simple enough for you?'

Luthar spluttered with laughter as he sharpened his short sword, and Logen laughed as well. Laughing with a man was a good step forward. First comes the laughter, then the respect, then the trust.

'God's breath!' shouted Longfoot, scrabbling his way out from under the branch. 'Can a man not eat without disturbance?'

'Sharp enough,' chuckled Luthar. 'No doubt.'

Logen hefted the sword in his hand. 'Yes, this Kanedias knew how to make a weapon, alright.'

'Making weapons is what Kanedias did.' Bayaz had stepped through the crumbling archway and into the overgrown orchard. 'He was the Master Maker, after all. The one that you hold is among the very least of what he made, forged to be used in a war against his brothers.'

'Brothers,' snorted Luthar. 'I know exactly how he felt. There's always something. Usually a woman, in my experience.' He gave his short sword one last stroke with the whetstone. 'And where women are concerned, I always come out on top.'

'Is that so?' Bayaz snorted. 'As it happens, a woman did enter the case, but not in the way you're thinking.'

Luthar gave a sickening grin. 'What other way is there to think about

women? If you ask me – gah!’ A large clod of bird shit splattered against the shoulder of his coat, throwing specks of black and grey all over his hair, his face, his newly cleaned swords. ‘What the . . . ?’ He scrambled from his seat and stared up at the wall above him. Ferro was squatting on top, wiping her hand on a spray of ivy. It was hard to tell with the bright sky behind, but Logen wondered if she might not have the trace of a smile on her face.

Luthar certainly wasn’t smiling. ‘You fucking mad bitch!’ he screamed, scraping the white goo from his coat and flinging it at the wall. ‘Bunch of bloody savages!’ And he shoved angrily past and through the fallen arch. Laughter was one thing, it seemed, but the respect might be a while coming.

‘In case any of you pinks are interested,’ called Ferro, ‘the riders are gone.’

‘Which way?’ asked Bayaz.

‘Away east, the way we came, riding hard.’

‘Looking for us?’

‘Who knows? They didn’t have signs. But if they are looking, more than likely they will find our trail.’

The Magus frowned. ‘Then you’d best get down from there. We need to move.’ He thought about it for a moment. ‘And try not to throw any more shit!’

And Next . . . My Gold

To Sand dan Glokta,

Superior of Dagoska, and for his eyes alone.

I am most troubled to discover that you think yourself short of both men and money.

As far as soldiers are concerned, you must make do with what you have, or what you can procure. As you are already well aware, the great majority of our strength is committed in Angland. Unfortunately, a certain rebellious temper among the peasantry throughout Midderland is more than occupying what remains.

As to the question of funds, I fear that nothing can be spared. You will not ask again. I advise you to squeeze what you can from the Spicers, from the natives, from anyone else who is to hand. Borrow and make do, Glokta. Demonstrate that resourcefulness that made you so famous in the Kantic War.

I trust that you will not disappoint me.

Sult

Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.

'Matters proceed with the greatest speed, Superior, if I may say so. Since the gates to the Upper City were M opened the work-rate of the natives has tripled! The ditch is down below sea level across the entire peninsula, and deepening every day! Only narrow dams hold back the brine at either end, and at your order the entire business is ready to be flooded!' Vissbruck sat back with a happy smile on his plump face. *Quite as if the whole thing had been his idea.*

Below them in the Upper City, the morning chanting was beginning. A strange wailing that drifted from the spires of the Great Temple, out over Dagoska and into every building, even here, in the audience chamber of the Citadel. *Kahdia calls his people to prayer.*

Vurms' lip curled at the sound. 'That time again already? Damn those natives and their bloody superstitions! We should never have let them back into their temple! Damn their bloody chanting, it gives me a headache!'

And it's worth it for that alone. Glokta grinned. 'If it makes Kahdia happy, your headache is something I can live with. Like it or not, we need the natives, and the natives like to chant. Get used to it, is my advice. That or wrap a blanket round your head.'

Vissbruck sat back in his chair and listened while Vurms sulked. 'I have to admit that I find the sound rather soothing, and we cannot deny the effect the Superior's concessions have had on the natives. With their help the land walls are repaired, the gates are replaced, and the scaffolds are already being dismantled. Stone has been acquired for new parapets but, ah, and here is the problem, the masons refuse to work another day without money. My soldiers are on quarter pay, and morale is low. Debt is the problem, Superior.'

'I'll say it is,' muttered Vurms angrily. 'The granaries are close to capacity, and two new wells have been dug in the Lower City, at great expense, but my credit is utterly exhausted. The grain merchants are after my blood!' A *damn*

sight less keenly than every merchant in the city is after mine, I daresay. 'I can scarcely show my face any longer for their clamouring. My reputation is in jeopardy, Superior!'

As if I had no larger concerns than the reputation of this dolt. 'How much do we owe?'

Vurms frowned. 'For food, water, and general equipment, no less than a hundred thousand.' *A hundred thousand? The Spicers love making money, but they hate spending it more. Eider will not come up with half so much, if she even chooses to try.*

'What about you, General?'

'The cost of hiring mercenaries, excavating the ditch, of the repairs to the walls, of extra weapons, armour, ammunition . . .' Vissbruck puffed out his cheeks. 'In all, it comes to nearly four hundred thousand marks.'

It was the most Glokta could do to keep from choking on his own tongue. *Half a million? A king's ransom and more besides. I doubt that Sult could provide so much, even if he had the mind, and he does not. Men die all the time over debts a fraction of the size.* 'Work however you can. Promise whatever you want. The money is on its way, I assure you.'

The General was already collecting his notes. 'I am doing all I can, but people are beginning to doubt that they will ever be paid.'

Vurms was more direct. 'No one trusts us any longer. Without money, we can do nothing.'

'Nothing,' growled Severard. Frost slowly shook his head.

Glokta rubbed at his sore eyes. 'A Superior of the Inquisition vanishes without leaving so much as a smear behind. He retires to his chambers at night, the door is locked. In the morning he does not answer. They break down the door and find . . .' *Nothing.* 'The bed has been slept in, but there is no body. Not the slightest sign of a struggle even.'

'Nothing,' muttered Severard.

'What do we know? Davoust suspected a conspiracy within the city, a traitor intending to deliver Dagoška to the Gurmish. He believed a member of the ruling council was involved. It would seem likely that he uncovered the identity of this person, and was somehow silenced.'

'But who?'

We must turn the question on its head. 'If we cannot find our traitor, we must make them come to us. If they work to get the Gurmish in, we need only succeed in keeping them out. Sooner or later, they will show themselves.'

'Rithky,' mumbled Frost. *Risky indeed, especially for Dagoška's latest Superior of the Inquisition, but we have no choices.*

'So we wait?' asked Severard.

'We wait, and we look to our defences. That and we try to find some money. Do you have any cash, Severard?'

'I did have some. I gave it to a girl, down in the slums.'

'Ah. Shame.'

'Not really, she fucks like a madman. I'd thoroughly recommend her, if you're interested.'

Glokta winced as his knee clicked. 'What a thoroughly heart-warming tale, Severard, I never had you down for a romantic. I'd sing a ballad if I wasn't so short of funds.'

'I could ask around. How much are we talking about?'

'Oh, not much. Say, half a million marks?'

One of the Practical's eyebrows went up sharply. He reached into his pocket, dug around for a moment, pulled his hand out and opened it. A few copper coins shone in his palm.

'Twelve bits,' he said. 'Twelve bits is all I can raise.'

'Twelve thousand is all I can raise,' said Magister Eider. *Scarcely a drop in the bucket.* 'My Guild are nervous, business has not been good, the great majority of their assets are bound up in ventures of one kind or another. I have little cash to hand either.'

I daresay you have a good deal more than twelve thousand, but what's the difference? I doubt even you have half a million tucked away. There probably isn't that amount in the whole city. 'One would almost think they didn't like me.'

She snorted. 'Turning them out of the temple? Arming the natives? Then demanding money? It might be fair to say you're not their favourite person.'

'Might it be fair to say they're after my blood?' *And plenty of it, I shouldn't wonder.*

'It might, but for the time being, at least, I think I've managed to convince them that you're a good thing for the city.' She looked levelly at him for a moment. 'You are a good thing, aren't you?'

'If keeping the Gurkish out is your priority.' *That is our priority, isn't it?* 'More money wouldn't hurt, though.'

'More money never hurts, but that's the trouble with merchants. They much prefer making it to spending it, even when it's in their own best interests.' She gave a heavy sigh, rapped her fingernails on the table, looked down at her hand. She seemed to consider a moment, then she began to pull the rings from her fingers. When she had finally got them all off, she tossed them into the box along with the coins.

Glokta frowned. 'A winning gesture, Magister, but I could not possibly—'

'I insist,' she said, unclasping her heavy necklace and dropping it into the box. 'I can always get more, once you've saved the city. In any case, they'll do me no good when the Gurkish rip them from my corpse, will they?' She slipped her heavy bracelets off her wrists, yellow gold, studded with green gemstones. They rattled down amongst the rest. 'Take the jewels, before I change my mind. A man lost in the desert should take such water—'

'As he is offered, regardless of the source. Kahdia told me the very same thing.'

'Kahdia is a clever man.'

'He is. I thank you for your generosity, Magister.' Glokta snapped the lid of the box shut.

'The least I could do.' She got up from her chair and walked to the door, her sandals hissing across the carpet. 'I will speak with you soon.'

'He says he must speak with you now.'

'What was his name, Shickel?'

'Mauthis. A banker.'

One more creditor, come clamouring for his money. Sooner or later I'll have to just arrest the pack of them. That will be the end of my little spending spree, but it will almost be worth it to see the looks on their faces. Glokta gave a hopeless shrug. 'Send him in.'

He was a tall man in his fifties, almost ill-looking in his gauntness, hollow-cheeked and sunken-eyed. There was a stern precision to his movements, a steady coldness to his gaze. *As though he is weighing the value of all he looks at in silver marks, including me.*

'My name is Mauthis.'

'I was informed, but I am afraid that there are no funds available at the present moment.' Unless you count Severard's twelve bits. 'Whatever debt the city has with your bank will have to wait. It will not be for much longer, I assure you.' *Just until the sea dries up, the sky falls in, and devils roam the earth.*

Mauthis gave a smile. *If you could call it that. A neat, precise, and utterly joyless curving of the mouth.* 'You misunderstand me, Superior Glokta. I have not come to collect a debt. For seven years, I have had the privilege of acting as the chief representative in Dagoska, of the banking house of Valint and Balk.'

Glokta paused, then tried to sound off-hand. 'Valint and Balk, you say? Your bank financed the Guild of Mercers, I believe.'

'We had some dealings with that guild, before their unfortunate fall from grace.' *I'll say you did. You owned them, from the ground up.* 'But then we have dealings with many guilds, and companies, and other banks, and individuals, great and small. Today I have dealings with you.'

'Dealings of what nature?'

Mauthis turned to the door and snapped his fingers. Two burly natives entered, grunting, sweating, struggling under the weight of a great casket: a box of polished black wood, bound with bands of bright steel, sealed with a heavy lock. They set it down carefully on the fine carpet, wiped sweat from their foreheads, and tramped out the way they came while Glokta frowned after them. *What is this?* Mauthis pulled a key from his pocket and turned it in the lock. He reached forward and lifted the lid of the chest. He moved out of the way, carefully and precisely, so Glokta could see the contents.

'One hundred and fifty thousand marks in silver.'

Glokta blinked. *And so it is.* The coins flashed and glittered in the evening light. Flat, round, silver, five mark pieces. Not a jingling heap, not some barbarian's horde. Neat, even stacks, held in place by wooden dowels. *As neat and even as Mauthis himself.*

The two porters were gasping their way back into the room, carrying between them a second box, slightly smaller than the first. They placed it on the floor and strode out, not so much as glancing at the fortune glittering in plain view beside them.

Mauthis unlocked the second chest with the same key, raised the lid, and stood aside. 'Three hundred and fifty thousand marks in gold.'

Glokta knew his mouth was open, but he could not close it. Bright, clean, gold, glowing yellow. All that wealth seemed almost to give off warmth, like a bonfire. It tugged at him, dragged at him, pulled him forward. He took a hesitant step, in fact, before he stopped himself. Great big, golden, fifty mark pieces. Neat, even stacks, just as before. *Most men would never in their lives see such coins. Few men indeed can ever have seen so many.*

Mauthis reached into his coat and pulled out a flat leather case. He placed it carefully on the table and unfolded it: once, twice, three times.

‘One half of one million marks in polished stones.’

There they lay on the soft black leather, on the hard brown table top, burning with all the colours under the sun. Two large handfuls, perhaps, of multi-coloured, glittering gravel. Glokta stared down at them, numb, and sucked at his gums. *Magister Eider’s jewels seem suddenly rather quaint.*

‘In total, I have been ordered by my superiors to advance to you, Sand dan Glokta, Superior of Dagoska, the sum of precisely one million marks.’ He unrolled a heavy paper. ‘You will sign here.’

Glokta stared from one chest to another and back. His left eye gave a flurry of twitches. ‘Why?’

‘To certify that you received the money.’

Glokta almost laughed. ‘Not that! Why the money?’ He flailed one hand at it all. ‘Why all this?’

‘It would appear that my employers share your concern that Dagoska should not fall to the Gurmish. More than that I cannot tell you.’

‘Cannot, or will not?’

‘Cannot. Will not.’

Glokta frowned at the jewels, at the silver, at the gold. His leg was throbbing, dully. *All that I wanted, and far more. But banks do not become banks by giving money away.* ‘If this is a loan, what is the interest?’

Mauthis flashed his icy smile again. ‘My employers would prefer to call it a contribution to the defence of the city. There is one condition, however.’

‘Which is?’

‘It may be that in the future, a representative of the banking house of Valint and Balk will come to you requesting . . . favours. It is the most earnest hope of my employers that, if and when that time comes, you will not disappoint them.’

One million marks worth of favours. And I place myself in the power of a most suspect organisation. An organisation whose motives I do not begin to understand. An organisation that, until recently, I was on the point of investigating for high treason. But what are my options? Without money, the city is lost, and I am finished. I needed a miracle, and here it is, sparkling before me. A man lost in the desert must take such water as is offered . . .

Mauthis slid the document across the table. Several blocks of neat writing, and a space, for a name. For my name. Not at all unlike a paper of confession. *And prisoners always sign their confessions. They are only offered when there is no choice.*

Glokta reached for the pen, dipped it in the ink, wrote his name in the space provided.

‘That concludes our business.’ Mauthis rolled up the document, smoothly

and precisely. He slipped it carefully into his coat. 'My colleagues and I are leaving Dagoska this evening.' *A great deal of money to contribute to the cause, but precious little confidence in it.* 'Valint and Balk are closing their offices here, but perhaps we will meet in Adua, once this unfortunate situation with the Gurkish is resolved.' The man gave his mechanical smile one more time. 'Don't spend it all at once.' And he turned on his heel and strode out, leaving Glokta alone with his monumental windfall.

He shuffled over to it, breathing hard, and stared down. There was something obscene about all that money. Something disgusting. Something frightening, almost. He snapped shut the lids of the two chests. He locked them with trembling hands. He shoved the key in his inside pocket. He stroked the metal bindings of the two boxes with his fingertips. His palms were greasy with sweat. *I am rich.*

He picked up a clear, cut stone the size of an acorn, and held it up to the window between finger and thumb. The dim light shone back at him through the many facets, a thousand brilliant sparks of fire – blue, green, red, white. Glokta did not know much about gemstones, but he was reasonably sure that this one was a diamond. *I am very, very rich.*

He looked back at the rest, sparkling on the flat piece of leather. Some of them were small, but many were not. Several were larger than the one he held in his hand. *I am immensely, fabulously wealthy. Imagine what one could do with so much money. Imagine what one could control . . . perhaps, with this much, I can save the city. More walls, more supplies, more equipment, more mercenaries. The Gurkish, thrown back from Dagoska in disarray. The Emperor of Gurkhul, humbled. Who would have thought it? Sand dan Glokta, once more the hero.*

He rolled the shining little pebbles around with a finger-tip, lost in thought. *But so much spending in so little time could raise questions. My faithful servant Practical Vitari would be curious, and she would make my noble master the Arch Lector curious. One day I beg for money, the next I spend it as if it burns? I was forced to borrow, your Eminence. Indeed? How much? No more than a million marks. Indeed? And who would lend such a sum? Why, our old friends at the banking house of Valint and Balk, your Eminence, in return for unspecified favours, which they might call in at any moment. Of course, my loyalty is still beyond question. You understand, don't you? I mean to say, it's only a fortune in jewels. Body found floating by the docks . . .*

He pushed his hand absently through the cold, hard, glittering stones, and they tickled pleasantly at the skin between his fingers. *Pleasant, but perilous. We must still tread carefully. More carefully than ever . . .*

Fear

It was a long way to the edge of the World, of that there could be no doubt. A long, and a lonely, and a nervous way. The sight of the corpses on the plain had worried everyone. The passing riders had made matters worse. The discomforts of the journey had in no way diminished. Jezal was still constantly hungry, usually too cold, often wet through, and would probably be saddle-sore for the rest of his days. Every night he stretched out on the hard and lumpy ground, dozed and dreamed of home, only to wake to the pale morning more tired and aching than when he lay down. His skin crawled, and chafed, and stung with the unfamiliar feeling of dirt, and he was forced to admit that he had begun to smell almost as vile as the others. It was enough, altogether, to make a civilised man run mad, and now, to add to all of this, there was the constant nagging of danger.

From that point of view, the terrain was not on Jezal's side. Hoping to shake off any pursuers, Bayaz had ordered them away from the river a few days earlier. The ancient road wound now through deep scars in the plain, through rocky gullies, through shadowy gorges, alongside chattering streams in deep valleys.

Jezal began to think on the endless, grinding flatness almost with nostalgia. At least out there one did not look at every rock, and shrub, and fold in the ground and wonder whether there was a crowd of bloodthirsty enemies behind it. He had chewed his fingernails almost until the blood ran. Every sound made him bite his tongue and spin around in his saddle, clutching at his steels, staring for a murderer, who turned out to be a bird in a bush. It was not fear, of course, for Jezal dan Luthar, he told himself, would laugh in the face of danger. An ambush, or a battle, or a breathless pursuit across the plain – these things, he imagined, he could have taken in his stride. But this endless waiting, this mindless tension, this merciless rubbing-by of slow minutes was almost more than he could stand.

It might have helped had there been someone with whom he could share his unease, but, as far as companionship went, little had changed. The cart still rolled along the cracked old road while Quai sat grim and silent on top. Bayaz said nothing but for the occasional lecture on the qualities of great leadership, qualities which seemed markedly absent in himself. Longfoot was off scouting out the route, only appearing every day or two to let them know how skilfully he was doing it. Ferro frowned at everything as though it was her personal enemy, and at Jezal most of all, it sometimes seemed, her hands never far from her weapons. She spoke rarely, and then only to Ninefingers, to snarl about ambushes, or covering their tracks better, or the possibilities of being followed.

The Northman himself was something of a puzzle. When Jezal had first laid eyes on him, gawping at the gate of the Agriont, he had seemed less than an

animal. Out here in the wild, though, the rules were different. One could not simply walk away from a man one disliked, then do one's best to avoid him, belittle him in company, and insult him behind his back. Out here you were stuck with the companions you had, and, being stuck with him, Jezal had come slowly to realise that Ninefingers was just a man, after all. A stupid, and a thuggish, and a hideously ugly one, no doubt. As far as wit and culture went, he was a cut below the lowliest peasant in the fields of the Union, but Jezal had to admit that out of all the group, the Northman was the one he had come to hate least. He had not the pomposity of Bayaz, the watchfulness of Quai, the boastfulness of Longfoot, or the simple viciousness of Ferro. Jezal would not have been ashamed to ask a farmer his opinion on the raising of crops, or a smith his opinion on the making of armour, however dirty, ugly or low-born they might have been. Why not consult a hardened killer on the subject of violence?

'I understand that you have led men in battle,' Jezal tried as his opening.

The Northman turned his dark, slow eyes on him. 'More than once.'

'And fought in duels.'

'Aye.' He scratched at the ragged scars on his stubbly cheek. 'I didn't come to look like this from a wobbly hand at shaving.'

'If your hand was that wobbly, you would choose, perhaps, to grow a beard.'

Ninefingers chuckled. Jezal was almost used to the sight now. It was still hideous, of course, but smacked more of good-natured ape than crazed murderer. 'I might at that,' he said.

Jezal thought about it a moment. He did not wish to make himself appear weak, but honesty might earn the trust of a simple man. If it worked with dogs, why not with Northmen? 'I myself,' he ventured, 'have never fought in a full-blooded battle.'

'You don't say?'

'No, truly. My friends are in Angland now, fighting against Bethod and his savages.' Ninefingers' eyes swivelled sideways. 'I mean . . . that is to say . . . fighting against Bethod. I would be with them myself, had not Bayaz asked me to come on this . . . venture.'

'Their loss is our gain.'

Jezal looked sharply across. From a subtler source, that might almost have sounded like sarcasm. 'Bethod started this war, of course. A most dishonourable act of unprovoked aggression on his part.'

'You'll get no argument from me on that score. Bethod's got a gift when it comes to starting wars. The only thing he's better at is the finishing of 'em.'

Jezal laughed. 'You can't mean that you think he'll beat the Union?'

'He's beaten worse odds, but you know best. We don't all have your experience.'

The laughter stuttered out in Jezal's throat. He was almost sure that had been irony, and it made him think for a moment. Was Ninefingers looking at him now, and behind that scarred, that plodding, that battered mask thinking, 'what a fool'? Could it be that Bayaz had been right? That there was something to be learned from this Northman after all? There was only one way to find out.

‘What’s a battle like?’ he asked.

‘Battles are like men. No two are ever quite the same.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Imagine waking up at night to hear a crashing and a shouting, scrambling out of your tent into the snow with your trousers falling down, to see men all around you killing one another. Nothing but moonlight to see by, no clue who’re enemies and who’re friends, no weapon to fight with.’

‘Confusing,’ said Jezal.

‘No doubt. Or imagine crawling in the mud, between the stomping boots, trying to get away but not knowing where to go, with an arrow in your back and a sword cut across your arse, squealing like a pig and waiting for a spear to stick you through, a spear you won’t even see coming.’>

‘Painful,’ agreed Jezal.

‘Very. Or imagine standing in a circle of shields no more than ten strides across, all held by men roaring their loudest. There’s just you and one other man in there, and that man’s won a reputation for being the hardest bastard in the North, and only one of you can leave alive.’

‘Hmm,’ murmured Jezal.

‘That’s right. You like the sound of any of those?’ Jezal did not, and Ninefingers smiled. ‘I didn’t think so, and honestly? Nor do I. I’ve been in all kind of battles, and skirmishes, and fights. Most of them started in chaos, and all of ’em ended in it, and not once did I not come near to shitting myself at some point.’

‘You?’

The Northman chuckled. ‘Fearlessness is a fool’s boast, to my mind. The only men with no fear in them are the dead, or the soon to be dead, maybe. Fear teaches you caution, and respect for your enemy, and to avoid sharp edges used in anger. All good things in their place, believe me. Fear can bring you out alive, and that’s the very best anyone can hope for from any fight. Every man who’s worth a damn feels fear. It’s the use you make of it that counts.’

‘Be scared? That’s your advice?’

‘My advice would be to find a good woman and steer well clear of the whole bloody business, and it’s a shame no one told me the same twenty years ago.’ He looked sideways at Jezal. ‘But if, say, you’re stuck out on some great wide plain in the middle of nowhere and can’t avoid it, there’s three rules I’d take to a fight. First, always do your best to look the coward, the weakling, the fool. Silence is a warrior’s best armour, the saying goes. Hard looks and hard words have never won a battle yet, but they’ve lost a few.’

‘Look the fool, eh? I see.’ Jezal had built his whole life around trying to appear the cleverest, the strongest, the most noble. It was an intriguing idea, that a man might choose to look like less than he was.

‘Second, never take an enemy lightly, however much the dullard he seems. Treat every man like he’s twice as clever, twice as strong, twice as fast as you are, and you’ll only be pleasantly surprised. Respect costs you nothing, and nothing gets a man killed quicker than confidence.’

‘Never underestimate the foe. A wise precaution.’ Jezal was beginning to realise that he had underestimated this Northman. He wasn’t half the idiot he

appeared to be.

'Third, watch your opponent as close as you can, and listen to opinions if you're given them, but once you've got your plan in mind, you fix on it and let nothing sway you. Time comes to act, you strike with no backward glances. Delay is the parent of disaster, my father used to tell me, and believe me, I've seen some disasters.'

'No backward glances,' muttered Jezal, nodding slowly to himself. 'Of course.'

Ninefingers puffed out his pitted cheeks. 'There's no replacement for seeing it, and doing it, but master all that, and you're halfway to beating anyone, I reckon.'

'Halfway? What about the other half?'

The Northman shrugged. 'Luck.'

'I don't like this,' growled Ferro, frowning up at the steep sides of the gorge. Jezal wondered if there was anything in the world she did like.

'You think we're followed?' asked Bayaz. 'You see anyone?'

'How could I see anyone from down here? That's the point!'

'Good ground for an ambush,' muttered Ninefingers. Jezal looked around him, nervously. Broken rocks, bushes, scrubby trees, the ground was full of hiding places.

'Well, this is the route that Longfoot picked for us,' grumbled Bayaz. 'and there's no purpose in hiring a cleaner if you're going to swab the latrines yourself. Where the hell is that damn Navigator anyway? Never around when you want him, only turns up to eat and boast for hours on end! If you knew how much that bastard cost me—'

'Damn it.' Ninefingers pulled his horse up and clambered stiffly down from his saddle. A fallen tree trunk, wood cracked and grey, lay across the gorge, blocking the road.

'I don't like this.' Ferro shrugged her bow from her shoulder.

'Neither do I,' grumbled Ninefingers, taking a step towards the fallen tree. 'But you have to be real—'

'That's far enough!' The voice echoed back and forth around the valley, brash and confident. Quai hauled on the reins and brought the cart to a sudden halt. Jezal looked along the lip of the gorge, his heart thumping in his mouth. He saw the speaker now. A big man dressed in antique leather armour, sitting carelessly on the edge of the drop with one leg dangling, his long hair flapping softly in the breeze. A pleasant and a friendly-looking man, as far as Jezal could tell at this distance, with a wide smile on his face.

'My name is Finnius, a humble servant of the Emperor Cabrian!'

'Cabrian?' shouted Bayaz. 'I heard he'd lost his reason!'

'He's got some interesting ideas.' Finnius shrugged. 'But he's always seen us right. Let me explain matters – we're all around you!' A serious-seeming man with a short sword and shield stepped out from behind the dead tree trunk. Two more appeared, and then three more, creeping out from behind the rocks, behind the bushes, all with serious faces and serious weapons. Jezal licked his lips. He would laugh in the face of danger, of course, but now it came to it

nothing seemed at all amusing. He looked over his shoulder. More men had come from behind the rocks they had passed a few moments before, blocking the valley in the other direction.

Ninefingers folded his arms. 'Just once,' he murmured, 'I'd like to take someone else by surprise.'

'There's a couple more of us,' shouted Finnius, 'up here, with me! Good hands with bows, and ready with arrows.' Jezal saw their outlines now against the white sky, the curved shapes of their weapons. 'So you see that you'll be going no further down this road!'

Bayaz spread his palms. 'Perhaps we can come to some arrangement that suits us both! You need only name your price and—'

'Your money's no good to us, old man, and I'm deeply wounded by the assumption! We're soldiers, not thieves! We have orders to find a certain group of people, a group of people wandering out in the middle of nowhere, far from the travelled roads! An old bald bastard with a sickly-looking boy, some stuck-up Union fool, a scarred whore, and an ape of a Northerner! You seen a crowd that might fit that description?'

'If I'm the whore,' shouted Ninefingers, 'who's the Northerner?'

Jezal winced. No jokes, please no jokes, but Finnius only chuckled. 'They didn't tell me you were funny. Reckon that's a bonus. At least until we kill you. Where's the other one, eh? The Navigator?'

'No idea,' growled Bayaz, 'unfortunately. If anyone dies it should be him.'

'Don't take it too hard. We'll catch up with him later.' And Finnius laughed an easy laugh, and the men around them grinned and fingered their weapons. 'So if you'd be good enough to give your arms to those fellows ahead of you, we can get you trussed up and start back towards Darmium before nightfall!'

'And when we get there?'

Finnius gave a happy shrug. 'Not my business. I don't ask questions of the Emperor, and you don't ask questions of me. That way, no one gets skinned alive. Do you take my meaning, old man?'

'Your meaning is hard to miss, but I am afraid that Darmium is quite out of our way.'

'What are you,' called Finnius, 'soft in the head?'

The nearest man stepped forward and grabbed hold of Bayaz' bridle. 'That's enough of that,' he growled.

Jezal felt that horrible sucking in his guts. The air around Bayaz' shoulders trembled, like the hot air above a forge. The foremost of the men frowned, opened his mouth to speak. His face seemed to flatten, then his head broke open and he was suddenly snatched away as though flicked by a giant, unseen finger. He had not even time to scream.

Nor had the four men who stood behind him. Their ruined bodies, the broken remnants of the grey tree trunk, and a great quantity of earth and rocks around them were ripped from the ground and flung through the air to shatter against the rocky wall of the gorge a hundred strides distant with a sound like a house collapsing.

Jezal's mouth hung open. His body froze. It had taken only a terrifying instant. One moment five men had been standing there, the next they were slaughtered meat among a heap of settling debris. Somewhere behind him he

heard the hum of a bowstring. There was a cry and a body dropped down into the valley, bounced from the sheer rocks and flopped rag-like, face down in the stream.

‘Ride, then!’ roared Bayaz, but Jezal could only sit in his saddle and gape. The air around the Magus was still moving, more than ever. The rocks behind him rippled and twisted like the stones on the bed of a stream. The old man frowned, stared down at his hands. ‘No . . .’ he muttered, turning them over before him.

The brown leaves on the ground were lifting up into air, fluttering as though on a gust of wind. ‘No,’ said Bayaz, his eyes opening wide. His whole body had begun to shake. Jezal gawped as the loose stones around them rose from the ground, drifting impossibly upwards. Sticks began to snap from the bushes, clods of grass began to tear themselves away from the rocks, his coat rustled and flapped, dragged upwards by some unseen force.

‘No!’ screamed Bayaz, then his shoulders hunched in a sudden spasm. A tree beside them split apart with a deafening crack and splinters of wood showered out into the whipping air. Someone was shouting but Jezal could scarcely hear them. His horse reared and he had not the wit to hold on. He crashed onto his back on the earth while the whole valley shimmered, trembled, vibrated around him.

Bayaz’ head snapped back, rigid, one hand up and clawing at the air. A rock the size of a man’s head flew past Jezal’s face and burst apart against a boulder. The air was filled with a storm of whipping rubbish, of fragments of wood, and stone, and soil, and broken gear. Jezal’s ears were ringing with a terrifying clattering, rattling, howling. He flung himself down on his face, crossed his arms over his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

He thought of his friends. Of West, and Jalenhorm, and Kaspa, of Lieutenant Brint, even. He thought of his family and his home, of his father and his brothers. He thought of Ardee. If he lived to see them again, he would be a better man. He swore it to himself with silent, trembling lips as the unnatural wind ripped the valley apart around him. He would no longer be selfish, no longer be vain, no longer be lazy. He would be a better friend, a better son, a better lover, if only he lived through this. If only he lived through this. If only . . .

He could hear his own terrified breath coming in quick gasps, the blood surging in his head.

The noise had stopped.

Jezal opened his eyes. He lifted his hands from his head and a shower of twigs and soil fell around him. The gorge was full of settling leaves, misty with choking dust. Ninefingers was standing nearby, red blood running down his dirty face from a cut on his forehead. He was walking slowly sideways. He had his sword drawn, hanging down by his leg. Someone was facing him. One of the men that had blocked the way behind them, a tall man with a mop of red hair. Circling each other. Jezal watched, kneeling, mouth wide open. He felt in some small way that he should intervene, but he had not the beginnings of an idea how to do so.

The red-haired man moved suddenly, leaping forwards and swinging his sword over his head. He moved fast, but Ninefingers was faster. He stepped

sideways so that the whistling blade missed his face by inches, then he slashed his opponent across the belly as he passed. The man grunted, stumbled a step or two. Ninefingers' heavy sword chopped into the back of his skull with a hollow clicking sound. He tripped over his own feet and pitched onto his face, blood bubbling from the gaping wound in his head. Jezal watched it spread slowly out through the dirt around the corpse. A wide, dark pool, slowly mingling with the dust and the loose soil on the valley floor. No second touch. No best of three.

He became aware of a scuffling, grunting sound, and looked up to see Ninefingers staggering around with another man, a great big man. The two of them were growling and clawing at each other, wrestling over a knife. Jezal gawped at them. When had that happened?

'Stab him!' shouted Ninefingers as the two of them grappled. 'Fucking stab him!' Jezal knelt there, staring up. One hand gripped the hilt of his long steel as though he were hanging off a cliff and this was the last handful of grass, the other hung limp.

There was a gentle thud. The big man grunted. There was an arrow sticking out of his side. Another thud. Two arrows. A third appeared, tightly grouped. He slid slowly out of Ninefingers' grip, onto his knees, coughing and moaning. He crawled towards Jezal, sat back slowly, grimacing and making a strange mewling sound. He lay back in the road, the arrows sticking up into the air like rushes in the shallows of a lake. He was still.

'What about that Finnius bastard?'

'He got away.'

'He'll get others!'

'It was deal with him or deal with that one there.'

'I had that one!'

'Course you did. If you could have held him another year, maybe Luthar might have got round to drawing a blade, eh?'

Strange voices, nothing to do with him. Jezal wobbled slowly up to his feet. His mouth was dry, his knees were weak, his ears were ringing. Bayaz lay in the road on his back a few strides away, his apprentice kneeling beside him. One of the wizard's eyes was closed, the other slightly open, the lid twitching, a slit of white eyeball showing underneath.

'You can let go of that now.' Jezal looked down. His hand was still clenched around the grip of his steel, knuckles white. He willed his fingers to relax and they slowly uncurled, far away. His palm ached from all that gripping. Jezal felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. 'You alright?' Ninefingers' voice.

'Eh?'

'You hurt?'

Jezal stared at himself, turning his hands over stupidly. Dirty, but no blood. 'I don't think so.'

'Good. The horses ran. Who can blame them, right? If I had four legs I'd be halfway back to the sea by now.'

'What?'

'Why don't you catch them?'

'Who made you the leader?'

Ninefingers heavy brows drew in slightly. Jezal became aware that they

were standing very close to one another, and that the Northman's hand was still on his shoulder. It was only resting there, but he could feel the strength of it through his coat, and it felt strong enough to twist his arm off. Damn his mouth, it got him in all kinds of trouble. He expected a punch in the face at the very least, if not a fatal wound in his head, but Ninefingers only pursed his lips thoughtfully and began to speak.

'We're a lot different, you and me. Different in all kind of ways. I see you don't have much respect for my kind, or for me in particular, and I don't much blame you. The dead know I got my shortcomings, and I ain't entirely ignorant of 'em. You may think you're a clever man, and I'm a stupid one, and I daresay you're right. There's sure to be a very many things that you know more about than I do. But when it comes to fighting, I'm sorry to say, there's few men with a wider experience than me. No offence, but we both know you're not one of 'em. No one made me the leader, but this is the task that needs doing.' He stepped closer still, his great paw gripping Jezal's shoulder with a fatherly firmness, halfway between reassurance and threat. 'Is that a worry?'

Jezal thought about it for a moment. He was out of his depth, and the events of the past few minutes had demonstrated beyond question just how far. He looked down at the man that Ninefingers had killed only a moment before, and the cleft in the back of his head yawned wide. Perhaps, for the moment, it would be best if he simply did as he was told.

'No worry,' he said.

'Good!' Ninefingers grinned, clapped him on the shoulder and let him go. 'Horses still need catching, and you're the man for the job, I reckon.'

Jezal nodded, and stumbled away to look for them.

One Hundred Words

There was something peculiar afoot, that was sure. Colonel Glokta tested his limbs, but he appeared unable to move. The sun was blinding bright in his eyes. 'Did we beat the Gurkish?' he asked.

'We certainly did,' said Haddish Kahdia, leaning over into Glokta's field of view. 'With God's help we put them to the sword. Butchered them like cattle.' The old native went back to chewing on the severed hand he held. He'd already got through a couple of fingers.

Glokta raised his arm to take it, but there was nothing there, only a bloody stump, chewed off at the wrist. 'I swear,' murmured the Colonel, 'it's my hand you're eating.'

Kahdia smiled. 'And it is entirely delicious. I do congratulate you.'

'Utterly delicious,' muttered General Vissbruck, taking the hand from Kahdia and sucking a strip of ragged flesh from it. 'Must be all that fencing you did as a young man.' There was blood smeared across his plump, smiling face.

'The fencing, of course,' said Glokta. 'I'm glad you like it,' though the whole business did seem somewhat strange.

'We do, we do!' cried Vurms. He was cupping the remains of Glokta's foot in his hands like a slice of melon, and nibbling at it daintily. 'All four of us are delighted! Tastes like roast pork!'

'Like good cheese!' shouted Vissbruck.

'Like sweet honey!' cooed Kahdia, sprinkling a little salt onto Glokta's midriff.

'Like sweet money,' purred Magister Eider's voice from somewhere down below.

Glokta propped himself up on his elbows. 'Why, what are you doing down there?'

She looked up and grinned at him. 'You took my rings. The least you can do is give me something in return.' Her teeth sank into his right thigh, deep in like tiny daggers, and scooped out a neat ball of flesh. She slurped blood hungrily from the wound, tongue darting out across his skin.

Colonel Glokta raised his eyebrows. 'You're right, of course. Quite right.' It really hurt a great deal less than one would have expected, but sitting upright was rather draining. He fell back onto the sand and lay there, looking up at the blue sky. 'All of you are quite right.'

She had made it up to his hip now. 'Ah,' giggled the Colonel, 'that tickles!' What a pleasure it was, he thought, to be eaten by such a beautiful woman. 'A little to the left,' he murmured, closing his eyes, 'just a little to the left . . .'

Glokta sat up in bed with an agonising jerk, back arched as tight as a full-

drawn bow. His left leg trembled under the clammy sheet, wasted muscles knotted hard with searing cramps. He bit down on his lip with his remaining teeth to keep from screaming, snorted heaving gasps through his nose, face screwed up with his furious efforts to control the pain.

Just when it seemed that his leg would rip itself apart, the sinews suddenly relaxed. Glokta collapsed back into his clammy bed and lay there, breathing hard. *Damn these fucking dreams.* Every part of him was aching, every part of him was weak and trembling, wet with cold sweat. He frowned in the darkness. There was a strange sound filling the room. A rushing, hissing sound. *What is that?* Slowly, gingerly, he rolled over and levered himself out of bed, hobbled to the window and stood there, looking out.

It was as though the city beyond his room had vanished. A grey curtain had descended, cutting him off from the world. *Rain.* It spattered against the sill, fat drops bursting into soft spray, throwing a cool mist into the chamber, dampening the carpet beneath the window, the drapes around the opening, soothing Glokta's clammy skin. *Rain.* He had forgotten that such a thing existed.

There was a flash, lightning in the distance. The spires of the Great Temple were cut out black through the hissing murk for an instant, and then the darkness closed back in, joined by a long, angry muttering of distant thunder. Glokta stuck his arm out through the window, felt the water pattering cold against his skin. A strange, unfamiliar feeling.

'I swear,' he murmured to himself.

'The first rains come.' Glokta nearly choked as he spun around, stumbled, clutched at the wet stones around the window for support. It was dark as hell in the room, there was no telling where the voice had come from. *Did I only imagine it? Am I still dreaming?* 'A sublime moment. The world seems to live again.' Glokta's heart froze in his chest. A man's voice, deep and rich. *The voice of the one who took Davoust? Who will soon take me?*

The room was illuminated by another brilliant flash. The speaker sat cross-legged on the carpet. An old black man with long hair. *Between me and the door. No way past, even if I was a considerably better runner than I am.* The light was gone as soon as it arrived, but the image persisted for a moment, burned into Glokta's eyes. Then came the crash of thunder splitting the sky, echoing in the darkness of the wide chamber. *No one would hear my despairing screams for help, even if anyone cared.*

'Who the hell are you?' Glokta's voice was squeaky with shock.

'Yulwei is my name. You need not be alarmed.'

'Not alarmed? Are you fucking joking?'

'If I had a mind to kill you, you would have died in your sleep. I would have left a body, though.'

'Some comfort.' Glokta's mind raced, thinking over the objects within reach. *I might make it as far as the ornamental tea-jar on the table. He almost laughed. And do what with it? Offer him tea? Nothing to fight with, even if I was a considerably more effective fighter than I am.* 'How did you get in?'

'I have my ways. The same ways in which I crossed the wide desert, travelled the busy road from Shaffa unobserved, passed through the Gurmish host and into the city.'

‘And to think, you could have just knocked.’

‘Knocking does not guarantee an entrance.’ Glokta’s eyes strained against the gloom, but he could see nothing beyond the vague grey outlines of furniture, the arched grey spaces of the other windows. The rain pattered on the sill behind, hissed quietly on the roofs of the city below. Just when he was wondering if his dream was over, the voice came again. ‘I have been watching the Gurmish, as I have these many years. That is my allotted task. My penance, for the part I played in the schism that has split my order.’

‘Your order?’

‘The Order of Magi. I am the fourth of Juvenis’ twelve apprentices.’

A Magus. I might have known. Like that bald old meddler Bayaz, and I gained nothing but confusion from him. As if there were not enough to worry about with politics and treachery, now we must have myth and superstition to boot. Still, it looks as if I will last out the night, at least.

‘A Magus, eh? Forgive me if I don’t celebrate. Such dealings as I’ve had with your order have been a waste of my time, at best.’

‘Perhaps I can repair our reputation, then. I bring you information.’

‘Free of charge?’

‘This time. The Gurmish are moving. Five of their golden standards pass down the peninsula tonight, under cover of the storm. Twenty thousand spears, with great engines of war. Five more standards wait behind the hills, and that is not all. The roads from Shaffa to Ul-Khatif, from Ul-Khatif to Daleppa, from Daleppa to the sea, all are thick with soldiers. The Emperor puts forth all his strength. The whole South moves. Conscripts from Kadir and Dawah, wild riders from Yashtavit, fierce savages from the jungles of Shamir, where men and women fight side by side. They all come northwards. Coming here, to fight for the Emperor.’

‘So many, just to take Dagoska?’

‘And more besides. The Emperor has built himself a navy. One hundred sail of great ships.’

‘The Gurmish are no sailors. The Union controls the seas.’

‘The world changes, and you must change with it or be swept aside. This war will not be like the last. Khalul finally sends forth his own soldiers. An army many long years in the making. The gates of the great temple-fortress of Sarkant are opening, high in the barren mountains. I have seen it. Mamun comes forth, thrice-blessed and thrice-cursed, the fruit of the desert, first apprentice of Khalul. Together they broke the Second Law, together they ate the flesh of men. The Hundred Words come behind, Eaters all, disciples of the Prophet, bred for battle and fed over these long years, adepts in the disciplines of arms and of High Art. No peril like it has faced the world since the Old Time, when Juvenis fought with Kanedias. Since before that, perhaps, when Glustrod touched the Other Side, and sought to open the gates to the world below.’

And blah, blah, blah. A shame. He had been making surprising sense for a Magus. ‘You want to give me information? Keep your bed-time stories and tell me what happened to Davoust.’

‘There is an Eater here. I smell it. A dweller in the shadows. One whose only task is to destroy those who oppose the Prophet.’ *And myself the first of them?*

'Your predecessor never left these chambers. The Eater took him, to protect the traitor who works within the city.'

Yes. *Now we speak my language.* 'Who is the traitor?' Glokta's voice sounded shrill, sharp, greedy in his own ear.

'I am no fortune-teller, cripple, and if I could give you the answer, would you believe me? Men must learn at their own pace.'

'Bah!' snapped Glokta. 'You are just like Bayaz. You talk, and talk, and yet you say nothing. Eaters? Nothing but old stories and nonsense!'

'Stories? Did Bayaz not take you within the Maker's House?' Glokta swallowed, his hand clinging trembling tight to the damp stone under the window. 'Yet still you doubt me? You are slow to learn, cripple. Have I not seen the slaves march to Sarkant, dragged from every land the Gurmish conquer? Have I not seen the countless columns, driven up into the mountains? To feed Khalul and his disciples, to swell their power ever further. A crime against God! A breach of the Second Law, written in fire by Euz himself! You doubt me, and perhaps you are wise to doubt me, but at first light you will see the Gurmish have come. You will count five standards, and you will know I spoke the truth.'

'Who is the traitor?' hissed Glokta. 'Tell me, you riddling bastard!' Silence, but for the splashing of rain, the trickling of water, the rustling of wind in the hangings about the window. A stroke of lightning threw sudden light into every corner.

The carpet was empty. Yulwei was gone.

The Gurmish host came slowly forward in five enormous blocks, two in front, three behind, covering the whole neck of land from sea to sea. They moved together in perfect formation to the deep thumping of great drums, rank upon rigid rank, the sound of their tramping boots like the distant thunder of the night before. Already, the sun had sucked away all evidence of the rain, and now it flashed mirror-bright on thousands of helmets, thousands of shields, thousands of swords, glittering arrow-heads, coats of armour. A forest of shining spears, moving inexorably forwards. A merciless, tireless, irresistible tide of men.

Union soldiers were scattered around the top of the land walls, squatting behind the parapet, fingering their flatbows, peering out nervously at the advancing host. Glokta could sense their fear. *And who can blame them? We must be outnumbered ten to one already.* There were no drums up here in the wind, no shouted orders, no hurried preparations. Only silence.

'And here they come,' mused Nicomo Cosca, grinning out at the scene. He alone seemed untouched by fear. *He has either an iron nerve or a leaden imagination. Lazing in a drinking-hole or waiting for death all seems to be one to him.* He was standing with one foot up on the parapet, forearms crossed on his knee, half-full bottle dangling from one hand. The mercenary's battle dress was much the same as his drinking gear. The same sagging boots, the same ruined trousers. His one allowance for the dangers of the battlefield was a black breastplate, etched front and back with golden scrollwork. It too had seen better days, the enamel chipped, the rivets stained with rust. *But it must*

once have been quite the masterpiece.

'That's a fine piece of armour you have there.'

'What, this?' Cosca looked down at his breastplate. 'In its day, perhaps, but it's seen some hard use over the years. Been left out in the rain more than once. A gift from the Grand Duchess Sefeline of Ospria, in return for defeating the army of Sipani in the five month war. It came with a promise of her eternal friendship.'

'Nice, to have friends.'

'Not really. That very night she tried to have me killed. My victories had made me far too popular with Sefeline's own subjects. She feared I might try to seize power. Poison, in my wine.' Cosca took a long swig from his bottle. 'Killed my favourite mistress. I was forced to flee, with little more than this damn breastplate, and seek employment with the Prince of Sipani. That old bastard didn't pay half so well, but at least I got to lead his army against the Duchess, and have the satisfaction of seeing her poisoned in her turn.' He frowned. 'Made her face turn blue. Bright blue, believe me. Never get too popular, that's my advice.'

Glokta snorted. 'Over-popularity is scarcely my most pressing worry.'

Vissbruck cleared his throat noisily, evidently upset at being ignored. He gestured towards the endless ranks of men advancing down the isthmus. 'Superior, the Gurkish approach.' *Indeed? I had not noticed.* 'Do I have your permission to flood the ditch?'

Oh yes, your moment of glory. 'Very well.'

Vissbruck strutted to the parapet with an air of the greatest self-importance. He slowly raised his arm, then chopped it portentously through the air. Somewhere, out of sight below, whips cracked and teams of mules strained on ropes. The complaining squeal of wood under great pressure reached them on the battlements, then a creaking and a cracking as the dams gave way, and then an angry thundering as the great weight of salt water broke through and surged down the deep ditch from both ends, foaming angry white. Water met water just beneath them, throwing glittering spray into the air as high as the battlements and higher yet. A moment later, and this new ribbon of sea was calm. The ditch had become a channel, the city had become an island.

'The ditch is flooded!' announced General Vissbruck.

'So we see,' said Glokta. 'Congratulations.' *Let us hope the Gurkish have no strong swimmers among them. They certainly have no shortage of men to choose from.*

Five tall poles waved gently above the tramping mass of soldiers, Gurkish symbols glittering upon them in solid gold. *Symbols of battles fought, and battles won.* The standards of five legions, flashing in the merciless sun. *Five legions. Just as the old man told me. Will ships follow, then?* Glokta turned his head and peered out across the Lower City. The long wharves stuck into the bay like the spines of a hedgehog, still busy with ships. *Ships carrying our supplies in, and a last few nervous merchants out. There were no walls there. Few defences of any kind. We did not think we needed them. The Union has always ruled the seas. If ships should come . . .*

'Do we still have supplies of wood and stone?'

The General nodded vigorously, all eagerness. *Finally adjusted to the changes*

in the chain of command, it seems. ‘Abundant supplies, Superior, precisely as your orders specified.’

‘I want you to build a wall behind the docks and along the shoreline. As strong, and as high, and as soon as possible. Our defences there are weak. The Gurkish may test them sooner or later.’

The General frowned out at the swarming army of soldiers crawling over the peninsula, looked down towards the calm docks, and back. ‘But surely the threat from the landward side is a little more . . . pressing? The Gurkish are poor sailors, and in any case have no fleet worthy of the name—’

‘The world changes, General. The world changes.’

‘Of course.’ Vissbruck turned to speak to his aides.

Glokta shuffled up to the parapet beside Cosca. ‘How many Gurkish troops, would you judge?’

The Styrian scratched at the flaky rash on the side of his neck. ‘I count five standards. Five of the Emperor’s legions, and plenty more besides. Scouts, engineers, irregulars from across the South. How many troops . . .’ He squinted up into the sun, lips moving silently as though his head was full of complex sums. ‘A fucking lot.’ He tipped his head back and sucked the last drops from his bottle, then he smacked his lips, pulled back his arm and hurled it towards the Gurkish. It flashed in the sun for a moment, then shattered against the hard dirt on the other side of the channel. ‘Do you see those carts at the back?’

Glokta squinted down his eye-glass. There did indeed seem to be a shadowy column of great wagons behind the mass of soldiery, barely visible in the shimmering haze and the clouds of dust kicked up by the stomping boots. *Soldiers need supplies of course, but then again . . .* Here and there he could see long timbers sticking up like spider’s legs. ‘Siege engines,’ muttered Glokta to himself. *All just as Yulwei said.* ‘They are in earnest.’

‘Ah, but so are you.’ Cosca stood up beside the parapet, started to fiddle with his belt. A moment later, Glokta heard the sound of his piss spattering against the base of the wall, far below. The mercenary grinned over his shoulder, thin hair fluttering in the salt wind. ‘Everyone’s in lots of earnest. I must speak to Magister Eider. I’d say I’ll be getting my battle money soon.’

‘I think so.’ Glokta slowly lowered his eye-glass. ‘And earning it too.’

The Blind Lead the Blind

The First of the Magi lay twisted on his back in the cart, wedged between a water barrel and a sack of horse feed, a coil of rope for his pillow. Logen had never seen him look so old, and thin, and weak. His breath came shallow, his skin was pale and blotchy, drawn tight over his bones and beaded with sweat. From time to time he'd twitch, and squirm, and mutter strange words, his eyelids flickering like a man trapped in a bad dream.

'What happened?'

Quai stared down. 'Whenever you use the Art, you borrow from the Other Side, and what is borrowed has to be repaid. There are risks, even for a master. To seek to change the world with a thought . . . the arrogance of it.' The corners of his mouth twitched up into a smile. 'Borrow too often, perhaps, one time you touch the world below, and leave a piece of yourself behind . . .'

'Behind?' muttered Logen, peering down at the twitching old man. He didn't much like the way Quai was talking. It was no smiling matter, as far as he could see, to be stuck out in the middle of nowhere without a clue where they were going.

'Just think,' whispered the apprentice. 'The First of the Magi himself, helpless as a baby.' He laid his hand gently on Bayaz' chest. 'He clings on to life by a thread. I could reach out now, with this weak hand . . . and kill him.'

Logen frowned. 'Why would you want to do that?'

Quai looked up, and smiled his sickly smile. 'Why would anyone? I was merely saying.' And he snatched his hand away.

'How long will he stay like this?'

The apprentice sat back in the cart and stared up at the sky. 'There's no saying. Maybe hours. Maybe forever.'

'Forever?' Logen ground his teeth. 'Where does that leave us? You have any idea where we're going? Or why? Or what we do when we get there? Should we turn back?'

'No.' Quai's face was sharp as a blade. Sharper than Logen would ever have expected from him. 'We have enemies behind us. To turn back now would be more dangerous than to continue. We carry on.'

Logen winced, and rubbed at his eyes. He felt tired, and sore, and sick. He wished he'd asked Bayaz his plans when he'd had the chance. He wished he'd never left the North, if it came to that. He could have sought out a reckoning with Bethod, and died in a place he knew, at the hands of men that he at least understood.

Logen had no wish to lead. The time was he'd hungered after fame, and glory, and respect, but the winning of them had been costly, and they'd proved to be hollow prizes. Men had put their faith in him, and he'd led them by a painful and a bloody route straight back to the mud. There was no ambition in him any more. He was cursed when it came to making decisions.

He took his hands away and looked around him. Bayaz still lay muttering in his fevered sleep. Quai was gazing carelessly up at the clouds. Luthar was standing with his back to the others, staring down the gorge. Ferro was sitting on a rock, cleaning her bow with a rag, and scowling. Longfoot had reappeared, predictably, just as the danger ended, and was standing not far away, looking pleased with himself. Logen grimaced, and gave a long sigh. There was no help for it. There was no one else.

‘Alright, we head for this bridge, at Aulcus, then we see.’

‘Not a good idea,’ tutted Longfoot, wandering up to the cart and peering in. ‘Not a good idea in the least. I warned our employer of that before his . . . mishap. The city is deserted, destroyed, ruined. A blighted, and a broken, and a dangerous place. The bridge may still stand, but according to rumour—’

‘Aulcus was the plan, and I reckon we’ll stick with it.’

Longfoot carried on as though he hadn’t spoken. ‘I think, perhaps, that it would be best if we headed back towards Calcis. We are still less than halfway to our ultimate destination, and have ample food and water for the return journey. With some luck—’

‘You were paid to go all the way?’

‘Well, er, indeed I was, but—’

‘Aulcus.’

The Navigator blinked. ‘Well, yes, I see that you are decided. Decisiveness, and boldness, and vigour, it would seem, are among your talents, but caution, and wisdom, and experience, if I may say, are among mine, and I am in no doubt whatsoever that—’

‘Aulcus,’ growled Logen.

Longfoot paused with his mouth half open. Then he snapped it shut. ‘Very well. We will follow the road back onto the plains, and head westward to the three lakes. Aulcus is at their head, but the journey is still a long and dangerous one, especially with winter well upon us. There should be—’

‘Good.’ Logen turned away before the Navigator had the chance to say anything more. That was the easy part. He sucked his teeth, and walked over to Ferro.

‘Bayaz is . . .’ he struggled for the right word. ‘Out. We don’t know how long for.’

She nodded. ‘We going on?’

‘Er . . . I reckon . . . that’s the plan.’

‘Alright.’ She got up from her rock and slung the bow over her shoulder. ‘Best get moving then.’

Easier than he’d expected. Too easy, perhaps. He wondered if she was thinking of sneaking off again. He was considering it himself, truth be told. ‘I don’t even know where we’re going.’

She snorted. ‘I’ve never known where I was going. You ask me, it’s an improvement, you in charge.’ She walked off towards the horses. ‘I never trusted that bald bastard.’

And that only left Luthar. He was standing with his back to the others, shoulders slumped, thoroughly miserable-looking. Logen could see the muscles on the side of his head working as he stared at the ground.

‘You alright?’

Luthar hardly seemed to hear him. 'I wanted to fight. I wanted to, and I knew how to, and I had my hand on my steels.' He slapped angrily at the hilt of one of his swords. 'I was helpless as a fucking baby! Why couldn't I move?'

'That it? By the dead, boy, that happens to some men the first time!'

'It does?'

'More than you'd believe. At least you didn't shit yourself.'

Luthar raised his eyebrows. 'That happens?'

'More than you'd believe.'

'Did you freeze up, the first time?'

Logen frowned. 'No. Killing comes too easy to me. Always has done. Believe me, you're the lucky one.'

'Unless I'm killed for doing nothing.'

'Well,' Logen had to admit, 'there is that.' Luthar's head dropped even lower, and Logen clapped him on the arm. 'But you didn't get killed! Cheer up, boy, you're lucky! You're still alive, aren't you?' He gave a miserable nod. Logen slid his arm round his shoulder and guided him back towards the horses. 'Then you've got the chance to do better next time.'

'Next time?'

'Course. Doing better next time. That's what life is.'

Logen climbed back into the saddle, stiff and sore. Stiff from all the riding, sore from the fight in the gorge. Some bit of rock had cracked him on the back, that and he'd got a good punch on the side of his head. Could have been a lot worse.

He looked round at the others. They were all mounted up, staring at him. Four faces, as different as could be, but all with the same expression, more or less. Waiting for his say. Why did anyone ever think he had the answers? He swallowed, and dug his heels in.

'Let's go.'

Prince Ladisla's Stratagem

'You really should spend less time in here, Colonel West.' Pike set down his hammer for a moment, the orange light from his forge reflecting in his eyes, shining bright on his melted face. 'People will start to talk.'

West cracked a nervous grin. 'It's the only warm place in the whole damn camp.' It was true enough, but a long way from the real reason. It was the only place in the whole damn camp where no one would look for him. Men who were starving, men who were freezing, men who had no water, or no weapon, or no clue what they were doing. Men who'd died of cold or illness and needed burying. Even the dead couldn't manage without West. Everyone needed him, day and night. Everyone except Pike and his daughter, and the rest of the convicts. They alone seemed self-sufficient, and so their forge had become his refuge. A noisy, and a crowded, and a smoky refuge, no doubt, but no less sweet for that. He preferred it immeasurably to being with the Prince and his staff. Here among the criminals it was more . . . honest.

'You're in the way, Colonel. Again.' Cathil shoved past him, a knife-blade glowing orange in the tongs in one gloved hand. She shoved it into the water, frowning, turning it this way and that while steam hissed up around her. West watched her move, quick and practised, beads of moisture on her sinewy arm, the back of her neck, hair dark and spiky with sweat. Hard to believe he'd ever taken her for a boy. She might handle the metal as well as any of the men, but the shape of her face, not to mention her chest, her waist, the curve of her backside, all unmistakably female . . .

She glanced over her shoulder and caught him looking. 'Don't you have an army to run?'

'They'll last ten minutes without me.'

She drew the cold, black blade from the water and tossed it clattering onto the heap beside the whetstone. 'You sure?'

Maybe she was right at that. West took a deep breath, sighed, turned with some reluctance, and ventured out through the door of the shed and into the camp.

The winter air nipped at his cheeks after the heat of the smithy, and he pulled up the collars of his coat, hugged himself as he struggled down the camp's main road. It was deathly quiet out here at night, once he had left the rattling of the forge behind him. He could hear the frozen mud sucking at his boots, his breath rasping in his throat, the faint cursing of some distant soldier, grumbling his way through the darkness. He stopped a moment and looked up, arms folded round himself for warmth. The sky was perfectly clear, the stars prickling bright, spread across the blackness like shining dust.

'Beautiful,' he murmured to himself.

'You get used to it.'

It was Threetrees, picking his way between the tents with the Dogman at his

shoulder. His face was in shadow, all dark pits and white angles like a cliff in the moonlight, but West could tell there was some ill news coming. The old Northman could hardly have been described as a figure of fun at the best of times, but now his frown was grim indeed.

'Well met,' said West in the Northern tongue.

'You think? Bethod is inside five days' march of your camp.' The cold seemed suddenly to cut through West's coat and make him shiver. 'Five days?'

'If he's stayed put since we saw him, and that ain't likely. Bethod was never one for staying put. If he's marching south, he could be three days away. Less even.'

'What are his numbers?'

The Dogman licked his lips, breath smoking round his lean face in the chill air. 'I'd guess at ten thousand, but he might have more behind.'

West felt colder yet. 'Ten thousand? That many?'

'Around ten, aye. Mostly Thralls.'

'Thralls? Light infantry?'

'Light, but not like this rubbish you have here.' Threetrees scowled around at the shabby tents, the badly built camp fires, close to guttering out. 'Bethod's Thralls are lean and bloody from battles and tough as wood from marching. Those bastards can run all day and still fight at the end of it, if it's needed. Bowmen, spearmen, all well-practised.'

'There's no shortage of Carls and all,' muttered the Dogman.

'That there ain't, with strong mail and good blades, and plenty of horses into the bargain. There'll be Named Men too, no doubt. It's the pick of the crop Bethod's brought with him, and some sharp war leaders in amongst 'em. That and some strange folk from out east. Wild men, from beyond the Crinna. Must have left a few boys dotted about up north, for your friends to chase around after, and brought his best fighters south with him, against your weakest.' The old warrior stared grimly round at the slovenly camp from under his thick eyebrows. 'No offence, but I don't give you a shit of a chance if it comes to a battle.'

The worst of all outcomes. West swallowed. 'How fast could such an army move?'

'Fast. Their scouts might be with us day after tomorrow. Main body a day later. If they've come right on, that is, and it's hard to say if they will. Wouldn't put it past Bethod to try and cross the river lower down, come round behind us.'

'Behind us?' They were scarcely equipped for a predictable enemy. 'How could he have known we were here?'

'Bethod always had a gift for guessing out his enemies. Good sense for it. That and he's a lucky bastard. Loves to take chances. Ain't nothing more important in war than a good slice o' luck.'

West looked around him, blinking. Ten thousand battle-hardened Northmen, descending on their ramshackle camp. Lucky, unpredictable Northmen. He imagined trying to turn the ill-disciplined levies, up to their ankles in mud, trying to get them to form a line. It would be a slaughter. Another Black Well in the making. But at least they had a warning. Three days to prepare their defences, or better still, to begin to retreat.

‘We must speak to the Prince at once,’ he said.



Soft music and warm light washed out into the chill night air as West jerked back the tent flap. He stooped through, reluctantly, with the two Northmen close behind him.

‘By the dead . . .’ muttered Threetrees, gaping round.

West had forgotten how bizarre the Prince’s quarters must appear to a newcomer, especially one who was a stranger to luxury. It was less a tent than a huge hall of purple cloth, ten strides or more in height, hung with Styrian tapestries and floored with Kantic carpets. The furniture would have been more in keeping in a palace than a camp. Huge carved dressers and gilt chests held the Prince’s endless wardrobe, enough to clothe an army of dandies. The bed was a gargantuan four-poster, bigger than most tents in the camp on its own. A highly polished table in one corner sagged under the weight of heaped-up delicacies, silver and gold plate twinkling in the candlelight. One could hardly imagine that only a few hundred strides away, men were cramped, and cold, and had not enough to eat.

Crown Prince Ladisla himself sat sprawled in a huge chair of dark wood, a throne, one could have said, upholstered in red silk. An empty glass dangled from one hand, while the other waved back and forth to the music of a quartet of expert musicians, plucking, fiddling, and blowing gently at their shining instruments in the far corner. Around his Highness were four of his staff, impeccably dressed and fashionably bored, among them the young Lord Smund, who had perhaps become, over the past few weeks, West’s least favourite person in the entire world.

‘It does you great credit,’ Smund was braying loudly to the Prince. ‘Sharing the hardships of the camp has always been a fine way to win the respect of the common soldier—’

‘Ah, Colonel West!’ chirped Ladisla, ‘and two of his Northern scouts! What a delight! You must take some food!’ He made a floppy, drunken gesture towards the table.

‘Thank you, your Highness, but I have eaten. I have some news of the greatest—’

‘Or some wine! You must all have wine, this is an excellent vintage! Where did that bottle get to?’ He fumbled about beneath his chair.

The Dogman had already crossed to the table and was leaning over it, sniffing at the food like . . . a dog. He snatched a large slice of beef from the plate with his dirty fingers, folded it carefully and stuffed it whole into his mouth, while Smund looked on, lip curled with contempt. It would have been embarrassing, under normal circumstances, but West had larger worries.

‘Bethod is within five days march of us,’ he nearly shouted, ‘with the best part of his strength!’

One of the musicians fumbled his bow and hit a screeching, discordant note. Ladisla jerked his head up, nearly sliding from his seat. Even Smund and his

companions were pulled from their indolence.

'Five days,' muttered the Prince, his voice hoarse with excitement, 'are you sure?'

'Perhaps no more than three.'

'How many are they?'

'As many as ten thousand, and veterans to a—'

'Excellent!' Ladisla slapped the arm of his chair as if it were a Northman's face. 'We are on equal terms with them!'

West swallowed. 'Perhaps in numbers, your Highness, but not in quality.'

'Come now, Colonel West,' droned Smund. 'One good Union man is worth ten of their kind.' He stared down his nose at Threetrees.

'Black Well proved that notion a fantasy, even if our men were properly fed, trained, and equipped. Aside from the King's Own, they are none of these things! We would be well advised to prepare defences, and make ready to withdraw if we must.'

Smund snorted his contempt for that idea. 'There is nothing more dangerous in war,' he disclaimed airily, 'than too much caution.'

'Except too little!' growled West, the fury already starting to pulse behind his eyes.

But Prince Ladisla cut him off before he had the chance to lose his temper. 'Gentlemen, enough!' He sprang up from his chair, eyes dewy with drunken enthusiasm. 'I have already decided on my strategy! We will cross the river and intercept these savages! They think to surprise us? Hah!' He lashed at the air with his wine glass. 'We will give them a surprise they will not soon forget! Drive them back over the border! Just as Marshal Burr intended!'

'But, your Highness,' stammered West, feeling slightly queasy, 'the Lord Marshal explicitly ordered that we remain behind the river—'

Ladisla flicked his head, as though bothered by a fly. 'The spirit of his orders, Colonel, not the letter! He can hardly complain if we take the fight to our enemy!'

'These men are fucking fools,' rumbled Threetrees, luckily in the Northern tongue.

'What did he say?' inquired the Prince.

'Er . . . he concurs with me that we should hold here, your Highness, and send to Lord Marshal Burr for help.'

'Does he indeed? And I thought these Northmen were all fire and vinegar! Well, Colonel West, you may inform him that I am resolved on an attack, and cannot be moved! We will show this so-called King of the Northmen that he does not hold a mono-poly on victory!'

'Good show!' shouted Smund, stamping his foot on the thick carpet. 'Excellent!' The rest of the Prince's staff voiced their ignorant support.

'Kick them back across the border!'

'Teach them a lesson!'

'Excellent! Capital! Is there more wine?'

West clenched his fists with frustration. He had to make one more effort, however embarrassing, however pointless. He dropped to one knee, he clasped his hands together, he fixed the Prince with his eye and gathered every ounce of persuasiveness he possessed. 'Your Highness, I ask you, I entreat you, I beg

you to reconsider. The lives of every man in this camp depend on your decision.'

The Prince grinned. 'Such is the weight of command, my friend! I realise your motives are of the best, but I must agree with Lord Smund. Boldness is the best policy in war, and boldness shall be my strategy! It was through boldness that Harod the Great forged the Union, through boldness that King Casamir conquered Angland in the first place! We will get the better of these Northmen yet, you'll see. Give the orders, Colonel! We march at first light!'

West had studied Casamir's campaigns in detail. Boldness had been one tenth of his success, the rest had been meticulous planning, care for his men, attention to every detail. Boldness without the rest was apt to be deadly, but he saw that it was pointless to say so. He would only anger the Prince and lose whatever influence he might still have. He felt like a man watching his own house burn down. Numb, sick, utterly helpless. There was nothing left for him to do but to give the orders, and do his best to see that everything was conducted as well as it could be.

'Of course, your Highness,' he managed to mutter.

'Of course!' The Prince grinned. 'We are all in agreement, then! Capital! Stop that music!' he shouted at the musicians. 'We need something with more vigour! Something with blood in it!' The quartet switched effortlessly to a jaunty martial theme. West turned, limbs heavy with hopelessness, and trudged out of the tent into the icy night.

Threetrees was hard on his heels. 'By the dead, but I can't work you people out! Where I come from a man earns the right to lead! His men follow because they know his quality, and respect him because he shares their hardships with 'em! Even Bethod won his place!' He strode up and down before the tent, waving his big hands. 'Here you pick the ones who know the least to lead, and fix on the biggest fool o' the whole pack for a commander!'

West could think of nothing to say. He could hardly deny it.

'That prick'll march the lot o' you right into your fucking graves! Back to the mud with you all, but I'm damned if I'll follow, or any of my boys. I'm done paying for other folks' mistakes, and I've lost enough to that bastard Bethod already! Come on, Dogman. This boat o' fools can sink without us!' And he turned and stalked away into the night.

The Dogman shrugged. 'Ain't all bad.' He closed to a conspiratorial distance, reached deep into his pocket and pulled something out. West stared down at an entire poached salmon, no doubt pilfered from the Prince's table. The Northman grinned. 'I got me a fish!' And he followed his chief, leaving West alone on the bitter hillside, Ladisla's martial music floating through the chill air behind him.

Until Sunset

‘Oy.’ A rough hand shook Glokta from his sleep. He rolled his head gingerly from the side he had been sleeping on, clenching his teeth at the pain as his neck clicked. *Does death come early in the morning, today?* He opened his eyes a crack. *Ah. Not quite yet, it seems. Perhaps at lunch time.* Vitari stared down at him, spiky hair silhouetted black in the early morning sun streaming through the window. ‘Very well, Practical Vitari, if you really can’t resist me. You’ll have to go on top, though, if you don’t mind.’

‘Ha ha. The Gurkish ambassador is here.’

‘The what?’

‘An emissary. From the Emperor himself, I hear.’

Glokta felt a stab of panic. ‘Where?’

‘Here in the Citadel. Speaking to the ruling council.’

‘Shit on it!’ snarled Glokta, scrambling out of bed, ignoring the stabbing pain in his leg as he swung his ruined left foot onto the floor. ‘Why didn’t they call for me?’

Vitari scowled down at him. ‘Maybe they preferred to talk to him without you. You think that could be it?’

‘How the hell did he get here?’

‘He came in by boat, under sign of parley. Vissbruck says he was duty bound to admit him.’

‘Duty-bound!’ spat Glokta as he struggled to pull his trousers up his numb and trembling leg, ‘That fat fucker! How long has he been here?’

‘Long enough for him and the council to make some pretty mischief together, if that’s their aim.’

‘Shit!’ Glokta winced as he shrugged his shirt on.



The Gurkish ambassador was, without doubt, a majestic presence.

His nose was prominent and hooked, his eyes burned bright with intelligence, his long, thin beard was neatly brushed. Gold thread in his sweeping white robe and his tall head-dress glittered in the bright sun. He held his body awesomely erect, long neck stretched out, chin held high, so that he looked always down at everything he deigned to look upon. Hugely tall and thin, he made the lofty, magnificent room seem low and shabby. *He could pass for an Emperor himself.*

Glokta was keenly aware of how bent and awkward he must look as he shuffled, grimacing and sweating, into the audience chamber. *The miserable crow faces the magnificent peacock. Still, battles are not always won by the most beautiful. Fortunately for me.*

The long table was surprisingly empty. Only Vissbruck, Eider, and Korsten dan Vurms were in their seats, and none of them looked pleased to see him arrive. *Nor should they, the bastards.*

‘No Lord Governor today?’ he barked.

‘My father is not well,’ muttered Vurms.

‘Shame you couldn’t stay and comfort him in his illness. What about Kahdia?’ No one spoke. ‘Didn’t think he’d take to a meeting with them, eh?’ he nodded rudely at the emissary. ‘How lucky for everyone that you three have stronger stomachs. I am Superior Glokta and, whatever you might have heard, I am in charge here. I must apologise for my late arrival, but no one told me you were coming.’ He looked daggers at Vissbruck, but the general was not interested in meeting his eye. *That’s right, you blustering fool. I won’t forget this.*

‘My name is Shabbed al Islik Burai.’ The ambassador spoke the common tongue perfectly, in a voice every bit as powerful, as authoritative, as arrogant as his bearing. ‘I come as emissary from the rightful ruler of all the South, mighty Emperor of mighty Gurkhul and all the Kantic lands, Uthman-ul-Dosht, loved, feared, and favoured above all other men within the Circle of the World, anointed by God’s right hand, the Prophet Khalul himself.’

‘Good for you. I would bow, but I strained my back getting out of bed.’

Islik gave a delicate sneer. ‘Truly a warrior’s injury. I have come to accept your surrender.’

‘Is that so?’ Glokta dragged out the nearest chair and sank into it. *I’m damned if I’m going to stand a moment longer, just for the benefit of this towering oaf.* ‘I thought it was traditional to make such offers once the fighting is over.’

‘If there is to be fighting, it will not last long.’ The ambassador swept across the tiles to the window. ‘I see five legions, arrayed in battle order upon the peninsula. Twenty thousand spears, and they are but a fraction of what comes. The troops of the Emperor are more numerous than the grains of sand in the desert. To resist us would be as futile as to resist the tide. You all know this.’ His eyes swept proudly across the guilty faces of the ruling council and came to rest on Glokta’s with a piercing contempt. *The look of a man who believes he has already won. No one could blame him much for thinking so. Perhaps he has.*

‘Only fools or madmen would choose to stand against such odds. You pinks have never belonged here. The Emperor offers you the chance to leave the South with your lives. Open the gates to us and you will be spared. You can leave on your little boats and float back to your little island. Let it never be said that Uthman-ul-Dosht is not generous. God fights beside us. Your cause is lost.’

‘Oh, I don’t know, we held our own in the last war. I’m sure we all remember the fall of Ulrioch. I know I do. The city burned brightly. The temples especially.’ Glokta shrugged. ‘God must have been elsewhere that day.’

‘That day, yes. But there were other battles. I am sure you also remember a certain engagement, at a certain bridge, where a certain young officer fell into our hands.’ The emissary smiled. ‘God is everywhere.’

Glokta felt his eyelid flickering. *He knows I am not likely to forget.* He remembered his surprise as a Gurmish spear cut into his body. Surprise, and disappointment, and the most intense pain. *Not invulnerable, after all.* He

remembered his horse rearing, dumping him from the saddle. The pain growing worse, the surprise turning into fear. Crawling among the boots and the bodies, gasping for air, mouth sour with dust, salty with blood. He remembered the agony as the blades cut into his leg. The fear turning to terror. He remembered how they dragged him, screaming and crying, from that bridge. *That night they began to ask their questions.*

'We won,' said Glokta, but his mouth was dry, his voice was cracked. 'We proved the stronger.'

'That was then. The world changes. Your nation's entanglements in the icy North put you at a most considerable disadvantage. You have managed to break the first rule of warfare. Never fight two enemies at once.'

His reasoning is hard to fault. 'The walls of Dagoska have frustrated you before,' Glokta said, but it did not sound convincing, even to his own ear. *Hardly the words of a winner.* He felt the eyes of Vurms, and Vissbruck, and Eider on him, making his back itch. *Trying to decide who holds the upper hand, and I know who I'd pick in their shoes.*

'Perhaps some of you have more confidence in your walls than others. I will return at sunset for your answer. The Emperor's offer lasts for this one day only, and will never be repeated. He is merciful, but his mercy has limits. You have until sunset.' And he swept from the room.

Glokta waited until the door had clicked shut before he slowly turned his chair around to face the others. 'What in hell was that?' he snarled at Vissbruck.

'Er . . .' The General tugged at his sweaty collar. 'It was incumbent upon me, as a soldier, to admit an unarmed representative of the enemy, in order to hear his terms—'

'Without telling me?'

'We knew you would not want to listen!' snapped Vurms. 'But he speaks the truth! Despite all our hard work, we are greatly outnumbered, and can expect no relief as long as the war drags on in Angland. We are nothing more than a pinprick in the foot of a huge and hostile nation. It might serve us well to negotiate while we still hold a position of some strength. You may depend upon it that we will receive no terms beyond a massacre once the city has fallen!'

True enough, but the Arch Lector is unlikely to agree. Negotiating a surrender was hardly the task for which I was appointed. 'You are unusually quiet, Magister Eider.'

'I am scarcely qualified to speak on the military aspects of such a decision. But as it turns out, his terms are generous. One thing is certain. If we refuse this offer, and the Gurkish do take the city by force, the slaughter will be terrible.' She looked up at Glokta. 'There will be no mercy then.'

All too true. On Gurkish mercy I am the expert. 'So all three of you are for capitulation?' They looked at each other, and said nothing. 'It has not occurred to you that once we surrender, they might not honour your little agreement?'

'It had occurred,' said Vissbruck, 'but they have honoured their agreements before, and surely some hope . . .' and he looked down at the table top, 'is better than none.' *You have more confidence in our enemy than in me, it would*

seem. Hardly that surprising. My own confidence could be higher.

Glokta wiped some wet from under his eye. 'I see. Then I suppose I must consider his offer. We will reconvene when our Gurmish friend returns. At sunset.' He rocked his body back and winced as he pushed himself up.

'You'll consider it?' hissed Vitari in his ear as he limped down the hall away from the audience chamber. 'You'll fucking consider it?'

'That's right,' snapped Glokta. 'I make the decisions here.'

'Or you let those worms make them for you!'

'We've each got our jobs. I don't tell you how to write your little reports to the Arch Lector. How I manage those worms is none of your concern.'

'None of my concern?' Vitari snatched hold of Glokta's arm and he tottered on his weak leg. She was stronger than she looked, a lot stronger. 'I told Sult you could handle things!' she snarled in his face. 'If we lose the city, without so much as a fight even, it's both our heads! And my head is my concern, cripple!'

'This is no time to panic,' growled Glokta. 'I don't want to end up floating in the docks any more than you do, but this is a delicate balance. Let them think they might get their way, then no one will make any rash moves. Not until I'm good and ready. Understand me when I say, Practical, that this will be the first and the last time that I explain myself to you. Now take your fucking hand off me.'

Her hand did not let go, rather the fingers tightened, cutting into Glokta's arm as hard as a vice. Her eyes narrowed, furious lines cut into her freckled face at their corners. *Might I have misjudged her? Might she be about to cut my throat?* He almost grinned at the thought. But Severard chose that moment to step out of the shadows further down the dim hall.

'Look at the two of you,' he murmured as he padded towards them. 'It always amazes me, how love blooms in the least likely places, and between the least likely people. A rose, forcing its way through the stony ground.' He pressed his hands to his chest. 'It warms my heart.'

'Have we got him?'

'Of course. Soon as he stepped out of the audience chamber.'

Vitari's hand had gone limp, and Glokta brushed it off and began to shuffle towards the cells. 'Why don't you come with us?' he called over his shoulder, having to stop himself rubbing the bruised flesh on his arm. 'You can put this in your next report to Sult.'

Shabbed al Islik Burai looked considerably less majestic sitting down. Particularly in a scarred, stained chair in one of the close and sweaty cells beneath the Citadel.

'Now isn't this better, to speak on level terms? Quite disconcerting, having you looming over me like that.' Islik sneered and looked away, as though talking to Glokta were a task far beneath him. *A rich man, harassed by beggars in the street, but we'll soon cure him of that illusion.*

'We know we have a traitor within our walls. Within the ruling council itself. Most likely one of those three worthies to whom you were just now giving your little ultimatum. You will tell me who.' No response. 'I am

merciful,' exclaimed Glokta, waving his hand airily, as the ambassador himself had done but a few short minutes before, 'but my mercy has limits. Speak.'

'I am here under a flag of parley, on a mission from the Emperor himself! To harm an unarmed emissary would be expressly against the rules of war!'

'Parley? Rules of war?' Glokta chuckled. Severard chuckled. Vitari chuckled. Frost was silent. 'Do they even have those any more? Save that rubbish for children like Vissbruck, that's not the way grown-ups play the game. Who is the traitor?'

'I pity you, cripple! When the city falls—'

Save your pity. You'll need it for yourself. Frost's fist scarcely made any sound as it sank into the ambassador's stomach. His eyes bulged out, his mouth hung open, he coughed a dry cough, somewhere close to vomiting, tried to breathe and coughed again.

'Strange, isn't it,' mused Glokta as he watched him struggle for air. 'Big men, small men, thin men, fat men, clever men, stupid men, they all respond the same to a fist in the guts. One minute you think you're the most powerful man in the world. The next you can't even breathe by yourself. Some kinds of power are nothing but tricks of the mind. Your people taught me that, below your Emperor's palace. There were no rules of war there, I can tell you. You know all about certain engagements, and certain bridges, and certain young officers, so you know that I've been just where you are now. There is one difference, however. I was helpless, but you can stop this unpleasantness at any time. You need only tell me who the traitor is, and you will be spared.'

Islik had got his breath back now. *Though a good deal of his arrogance is gone, one suspects for good.* 'I know nothing of any traitor!'

'Really? Your master the Emperor sends you here to negotiate without all the facts? Unlikely. But if it's true, you really aren't any use to me at all, are you?'

Islik swallowed. 'I know nothing of any traitor.'

'We'll see.'

Frost's big white fist clubbed him in the face. It would have thrown him sideways if the albino's other fist hadn't caught his head before it fell, smashed his nose and knocked him clean over the back of the chair. Frost and Severard dragged him up between them, righted the chair and dumped him gasping into it. Vitari looked on, arms folded.

'All very painful,' said Glokta, 'but pain can be put to one side, if one knows that it will not last long. If it cannot last, say, past sunset. To truly break a man quickly, you have to threaten to deprive him of something. To hurt him in a way that will never heal. I should know.'

'Gah!' squawked the ambassador, thrashing in his chair. Severard wiped his knife on the shoulder of the man's white robe, then tossed his ear onto the table. It lay there, on the wood: a forlorn and bloody half-circle of flesh. Glokta stared at it. *In a baking cell just like this, over the course of long months, the Emperor's servants turned me into this revolting, twisted mockery of a man. One might have hoped that the chance at doing the same to one of them, the chance at cutting out vengeance, pound for pound, would provide some dull flicker of pleasure.* And yet he felt nothing. Nothing but my own pain. He winced as he stretched his leg out and felt the knee click, hissed air through his empty

gums. *So why do I do this?*

Glokta sighed. 'Next will come a toe. Then a finger, an eye, a hand, your nose, and so on, do you see? It'll be at least an hour before you're missed, and we are quick workers.' Glokta nodded at the severed ear. 'We could have a pile of your flesh a foot high by that time. I'll carve you until you're nothing but a tongue and a bag of guts, if that's what it takes, but I'll know who the traitor is, that I promise you. Well? Do you know anything yet?'

The ambassador stared at him, breathing hard, dark blood running from his magnificent nose, down his chin, dripping from the side of his head. *Speechless with shock, or thinking on his next move? It hardly matters.* 'I grow bored. Start on his hands, Frost.' The albino seized hold of his wrist.

'Wait!' wailed the ambassador, 'God help me, wait! It was Vurms. Korsten dan Vurms, the governor's own son!'

Vurms. Almost too obvious. But then again, the most obvious answers are usually the right ones. That little bastard would sell his own father if he only thought that he could find a buyer—

'And the woman, Eider!'

Glokta frowned. 'Eider? You sure?'

'She planned it! She planned the whole thing!' Glokta sucked slowly at his empty gums. They tasted sour. *An awful sense of disappointment, or an awful sense of having known all along? She was always the only one with the brains, or the guts, or the resources, for treason. A shame. But we know better than to hope for happy endings.*

'Eider and Vurms,' muttered Glokta. 'Vurms and Eider. Our sordid little mystery comes to a close.' He looked up at Frost. 'You know what to do.'

Long Odds

The hill rose out of the grass, a round, even cone like a thing man-made. Strange, this one great mound standing out in the midst of the level plain. Ferro did not trust it. Weathered stones stood in a rough circle around its top and scattered about the slopes, some up on end, some lying on their sides, the smallest no more than knee high, the biggest twice as tall as a man. Dark, bare stones, standing defiant against the wind. Ancient, cold, angry. Ferro frowned at them.

It felt as though they frowned back.

‘What is this place?’ asked Ninefingers.

Quai shrugged. ‘Old is what this place is, terribly old. Older than the Empire itself. Built before the time of Euz, perhaps, when devils roamed the earth.’ He grinned. ‘Built by devils, for all I know. Who can say? Some temple to forgotten gods? Some tomb?’

‘Our tomb,’ whispered Ferro.

‘What?’

‘Good place to stop,’ she said out loud. ‘Get a look across the plain.’

Ninefingers frowned up at it. ‘Alright. We stop.’

Ferro stood on one of the stones, hands on hips, staring out across the plain through narrowed eyes. The wind tore at the grass and made waves from it, like the waves on the sea. It tore at the great clouds too, twisting them, ripping them open, dragging them through the sky. It lashed at Ferro’s face, nipped at her eyes, but she ignored it.

Damn wind, just like always.

Ninefingers stood beside her, squinting into the cold sun. ‘Anything out there?’

‘We are followed.’ They were far away, but she could see them. Tiny dots in the far distance. Tiny riders moving on the ocean of grass.

Ninefingers grimaced. ‘You sure?’

‘Yes. You surprised?’

‘No.’ He gave up looking and rubbed at his eyes. ‘Bad news is never a surprise. Just a disappointment.’

‘I count thirteen.’

‘You can count ’em? I can’t even see ’em. They coming for us?’ She raised her arms. ‘You see anything else out here? Might be that laughing bastard Finnius found some more friends.’

‘Shit.’ He looked down at the cart, drawn up at the base of the hill. ‘We can’t outrun them.’

‘No.’ She curled her lip. ‘You could ask the spirits for their opinion.’

‘So they could tell us what? That we’re fucked?’ Silence for a moment.

'Better to wait, and fight them here. Bring the cart up to the top. At least we've got a hill, and a few rocks to hide behind.'

'That's what I was thinking. Gives us some time to prepare the ground.'

'Alright. We'd best get to it.'

The point of the shovel bit into the ground with the sharp scrape of metal on earth. An all too familiar sound. Digging pits and digging graves. What was the difference?

Ferro had dug graves for all kinds of people. Companions, or as close as she had come to companions. Friends, or as close as she had come to friends. A lover or two, if you could call them that. Bandits, killers, slaves. Whoever hated the Gurmish. Whoever hid in the Badlands, for whatever reason.

Spade up and spade down.

When the fighting is over, you dig, if you are still alive. You gather up the bodies in a line. You dig the graves in a row. You dig for your fallen comrades. Your slashed, your punctured, your hacked and your broken comrades. You dig as deep as you can be bothered, you dump them in, you cover them up, they rot away and are forgotten, and you go on, alone. That's the way it's always been.

But here, on this strange hill in the middle of this strange country, there was still time. Still a chance for the comrades to live. That was the difference, and for all her scorn, and her scowls, and her anger, she clung to it as she clung to the spade, desperate tight.

Strange how she never stopped hoping.

'You dig well,' said Ninefingers. She squinted up at him, standing over her at the edge of the pit.

'Lots of practice.' She dug the spade into the earth beside the hole, planted her hands on the sides and jumped out, sat on the edge with her legs hanging down. Her shirt was stuck to her with sweat, her face was running with it. She wiped her forehead with her dirty hand. He handed her the water-skin and she took it from him, pulled the stopper out with her teeth.

'How long do we have?'

She sucked a mouthful out of the skin and worked it round, spat it out. 'Depends how hard they go.' She took another mouthful and swallowed. 'They are going hard now. They keep that up, they could be on us late tonight, or maybe dawn tomorrow.' She handed the skin back.

'Dawn tomorrow.' Ninefingers slowly pushed the stopper back in. 'Thirteen you said, eh?'

'Thirteen.'

'And four of us.'

'Five, if the Navigator comes to help.'

Ninefingers scratched at his jaw. 'Not very likely.'

'That apprentice any use in a fight?'

Ninefingers winced. 'Not much.'

'How about Luthar?'

'I'd be surprised if he's ever thrown a fist in anger, let alone a blade.'

Ferro nodded. 'Thirteen against two, then.'

'Long odds.'

'Very.'

He took a deep breath and stared down into the pit. 'If you had a mind to run, I can't say I'd blame you.'

'Huh,' she snorted. Strange, but she hadn't even thought about it. 'I'll stick. See how it turns out.'

'Alright. Good. Can't say I don't need you.'

The wind rustled in the grass and sighed against the stones. There were things that should be said at a time like this, Ferro guessed, but she did not know what. She had never had much talk in her.

'One thing. If I die, you bury me.' She held her hand out to him. 'Deal?'

He raised an eyebrow at it. 'Done.' It was a long time, she realised, since she touched another person without the purpose of hurting them. It was a strange feeling, his hand gripped in hers, his fingers tight round hers, his palm pressed against hers. Warm. He nodded at her. She nodded at him. Then they let go.

'What if we both die?' he said.

She shrugged. 'Then the crows can pick us clean. After all, what's the difference?'

'Not much,' he muttered, starting off down the slope. 'Not much.'

The Road to Victory

West stood by a clump of stunted trees, in the cutting wind, on the high ground above the river Cumnur, and watched the long column move. More accurately, he watched it not move.

The neat blocks of the King's Own, up at the head of Prince Ladisla's army, marched smartly enough. You could tell them from their armour, glinting in the odd ray of pale sun that broke through the ragged clouds, from the bright uniforms of their officers, from the red and golden standards snapping at the front of each company. They were already across the river, formed up in good order, a stark contrast with the chaos on the other side.

The levies had started eagerly, early that morning, no doubt relieved to be leaving the miserable camp behind, but it hadn't been an hour before a man here or a man there, older than the others, or worse shod, had started to lag, and the column had grown ragged. Men slipped and stumbled in the half-frozen muck, cursing and barging into their neighbours, boots tripping on the boots of the man in front. The battalions had twisted, stretched, turned from neat blocks into shapeless blobs, merged with the units in front and behind, until the column moved in great ripples, one group hurrying forward while the next was still, like the segments of some monstrous, filthy earthworm.

As soon as they reached the bridge they had lost all semblance of order. The ragged companies squeezed into that narrow space, shoving and grunting, tired and bad-tempered. Those waiting behind pressed in tighter and tighter, impatient to be across so they could rest, slowing everything down still further with the weight of their bodies. Then a cart, which had no business being there in any case, had lost a wheel halfway across, and the sluggish flow of men over the bridge had become a trickle. No one seemed to know how to move it, or who to get to fix it, and contented themselves with clambering over it, or slithering around it, and holding up the thousands behind.

Quite a press had built up in the mud on this side of the fast-flowing water. Men barged and grumbled shoulder to shoulder, spears sticking up into the air at all angles, surrounded by shouting officers and an ever increasing detritus of rubbish and discarded gear. Behind them the great snake of shambling men continued its spastic forward movement, feeding ever more soldiers into the confusion before the bridge. There was not the slightest evidence that anyone had even thought about trying to make them stop, let alone succeeded.

All this in column, under no pressure from the enemy, and with a half decent road to march on. West dreaded to imagine trying to manoeuvre them in a battle line, through trees or over broken ground. He jammed his tired eyes shut, rubbed at them with his fingers, but when he opened them the horrifying, hilarious spectacle was still there before him. He hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

He heard the sound of hooves on the rise behind him. Lieutenant

Jalenhorm, big and solid in his saddle. Short on imagination, perhaps, but a fine rider, and a trustworthy man. A good choice for the task that West had in mind.

‘Lieutenant Jalenhorm reporting, sir.’ The big man turned in his saddle and looked down towards the river. ‘Looks like they’re having some trouble on the bridge.’

‘Doesn’t it just. Only the start of our troubles, I fear.’

Jalenhorm grinned down. ‘I understand we have the advantage of numbers, and of surprise—’

‘As far as numbers go, maybe. Surprise?’ West gestured down at the men milling around on the bridge, heard the vague, desperate shouts of their officers. ‘This rabble? A blind man would hear us coming from ten miles distance. A blind and a deaf one would probably smell us before we were halfway to battle order. We’ll be all day just getting across the river. And that’s hardly the worst of our shortcomings. In the area of command, I fear, the gulf between us and our enemy could not possibly be wider. The Prince lives in a dream, and his staff exist only to keep him there, at any price.’

‘But surely—’

‘The price could be our lives.’

Jalenhorm frowned. ‘Come on, West, I hardly want to be going into battle with that thought first on my mind—’

‘You won’t be going.’

‘I won’t?’

‘You will pick out six good men from your company, with spare mounts. You will ride as hard as possible for Ostenhorm, then north to Lord Marshal Burr’s camp.’ West reached into his coat and pulled out his letter. ‘You will give him this. You will inform him that Bethod is already behind him with the greater part of his strength, and that Prince Ladisla has most ill-advisedly decided to cross the river Cumnur and give the Northmen battle, directly against the Marshal’s orders.’ West clenched his teeth. ‘Bethod will see us coming from miles away. We are handing the choice of the ground to our enemy, so that Prince Ladisla can appear bold. Boldness is the best policy in war, apparently.’

‘West, surely it’s not that bad?’

‘When you reach Marshal Burr, tell him that Prince Ladisla has almost certainly been defeated, quite possibly destroyed, and the road to Ostenhorm left open. He’ll know what to do.’

Jalenhorm stared down at the letter, reached out to take it, then paused. ‘Colonel, I really wish that you’d send someone else. I should fight—’

‘Your fighting cannot possibly make any real difference, Lieutenant, but your carrying this message might. There is no sentiment in this, believe me. I have no more important task than this one, and you are the man I trust to get it done. Do you understand your orders?’

The big man swallowed, then he took the letter, undid a button and slid it carefully down inside his coat. ‘Of course, sir. I am honoured to carry it.’ He began to turn his horse.

‘There is one more thing.’ West took a deep breath. ‘If I should . . . get myself killed. When this is over, could you carry a message to my sister?’

‘Come on, there’ll be no need for—’

‘I hope to live, believe me, but this is war. Not everyone will. If I don’t come back, just tell Ardee . . .’ He thought about it for a moment. ‘Just tell her I’m sorry. That’s all.’

‘Of course. But I hope you’ll tell her yourself.’

‘So do I. Good luck.’ West held out his hand.

Jalenhorm reached down and squeezed it in his own. ‘And to you.’ He spurred his mount down the rise, away from the river. West watched him go for a minute, then he took a deep breath and set off in the other direction, towards the bridge.

Someone had to get that damn column moving again.

Necessary Evils

The sun was half a shimmering golden disc beyond the land walls, throwing orange light into the hallway down which Glokta shuffled, Practical Frost looming at his shoulder. Through the windows as he passed painfully by he could see the buildings of the city casting long shadows up towards the rock. He could almost tell, at each window that he came to, that the shadows were longer and less distinct, the sun was dimmer and colder. *Soon it would be gone. Soon it will be night.*

He paused for a moment before the doors to the audience chamber, catching his breath, letting the ache in his leg subside, licking at his empty gums. 'Give me the bag, then.'

Frost handed him the sack, put one white hand against the doors. 'You reathy?' he mumbled.

Ready as I'll ever be. 'Let's get on with it.'

General Vissbruck was sitting stiff in his well-starched uniform, jowls bulging slightly over his high collar, hands plucking nervously at each other. Korsten dan Vurms was doing his best to look nonchalant, but his darting tongue betrayed his anxiety. Magister Eider was sitting upright, hands clasped on the table before her, face stern. *All business.* A necklace of large rubies glowed with the last embers of the setting sun. *Didn't take her too long to find some more jewels, I see.*

There was one more member of the gathering, and he showed not the slightest sign of nerves. Nicomo Cosca was lounging against the far wall, not far behind his employer, arms crossed over his black breastplate. Glokta noted that he had a sword at his hip, and a long dagger at the other.

'What's he doing here?'

'This concerns everyone in the city,' said Eider calmly. 'It is too important a decision for you to make alone.'

'So he's going to ensure that you get a fair say, eh?' Cosca shrugged and examined his dirty fingernails. 'And what of the writ, signed by all twelve chairs on the Closed Council?'

'Your paper will not save us from the Emperor's vengeance if the Gurkish take the city.'

'I see. So you have it in mind to defy me, to defy the Arch Lector, to defy the King?'

'I have it in mind to hear out the Gurkish emissary, and to consider the facts.'

'Very well,' said Glokta. He stepped forwards and upended the bag. 'Give him your ear.' Islik's head dropped onto the table with a hollow clonking sound. It had no expression to speak of, beyond an awful slackness, eyes open and staring off in different directions, tongue lolling slightly. It rolled awkwardly along the beautiful table top, leaving an uneven curve of bloody

smears on the brightly polished wood, and came to rest, face up, just in front of General Vissbruck.

A touch theatrical, perhaps, but dramatic. You'd have to give me that. No one can be left in any doubt as to my level of commitment. Vissbruck gawped down at the bloody head on the table before him, his mouth slowly falling further and further open. He started up from his seat and stumbled back, his chair clattering over on the tiles. He raised a shaking finger to point at Glokta.

'You're mad! You're mad! There'll be no mercy for anyone! Every man, woman, and child in Dagoska! If the city falls now, there's no hope for any of us!'

Glokta smiled his toothless smile. 'Then I suggest that every one of you commits themselves wholeheartedly to ensuring that the city does not fall.' He looked over at Korsten dan Vurms. 'Unless it's already too late for that, eh? Unless you've already sold the city to the Gurkish, and you can't go back!'

Vurms' eyes flickered to the door, to Cosca, to the horrified General Vissbruck, to Frost, hulking ominous in the corner, and finally to Magister Eider, still sitting steely calm and composed. *And our little conspiracy is jerked from the shadows.*

'He knows!' screamed Vurms, shoving back his chair and stumbling up, taking a step towards the windows.

'Clearly he knows.'

'Then do something, damn it!'

'I already have,' said Eider. 'By now, Cosca's men will have seized the land walls, bridged your channel, and opened the gates to the Gurkish. The docks, the Great Temple, and even the Citadel itself, are also in their hands.' There was a faint rattling beyond the door. 'I do believe that I can hear them now, just outside. I am sorry, Superior Glokta, indeed I am. You have done everything his Eminence could have expected, and more, but the Gurkish will already be pouring into the city. You see that further resistance is pointless.'

Glokta looked up at Cosca. 'May I retort?' The Styrian gave a small smile, a stiff bow. 'Most kind. I hate to disappoint you, but the gates are in the hands of Haddish Kahdia, and several of his most committed priests. He said that he would open them to the Gurkish – what was his phrase – “when God himself commanded it.” Do you have a divine visitation planned?' It was plain from Eider's face that she had not. 'As for the Citadel, it has been seized by the Inquisition, for the safety of his Majesty's loyal subjects, of course. Those are my Practicals that you can hear outside. As for Master Cosca's mercenaries—'

'At their posts on the walls, Superior, as ordered!' The Styrian snapped his heels together and gave an impeccable salute. 'They stand ready to repel any assault by the Gurkish.' He grinned down at Eider. 'I do apologise that I must leave your service at such a crucial time, Magister, but you understand that I had a better offer.'

There was a stunned pause. Vissbruck could hardly have looked more flabbergasted if he had been struck by lightning. Vurms stared around, wide-eyed. He took one more step back and Frost took a stride towards him. Magister Eider's face had drained of colour. *And so the chase ends, and the foxes are at bay.*

'You should hardly be surprised.' Glokta settled back comfortably in his

chair. 'Nicomo Cosca's disloyalty is a legend throughout the Circle of the World. There's hardly a land under the sun in which he hasn't betrayed an employer.' The Styrian smiled and bowed once more.

'It is your wealth,' muttered Eider, 'not his disloyalty, that surprises me. Where did you get it?'

Glokta grinned. 'The world is full of surprises.'

'You fucking stupid bitch!' screamed Vurms. His steel was only halfway out before Frost's white fist crunched into his jaw and flung him senseless against the wall. Almost at the same moment the doors crashed open and Vitari burst into the room, half a dozen Practicals behind her, weapons at the ready.

'Everything alright?' she asked.

'Actually, we're just finishing up. Take out the rubbish would you, Frost?'

The albino's fingers closed around Vurms' ankle and hauled him bodily across the floor and out of the audience chamber. Eider watched his slack face slide across the tiles, then looked up at Glokta. 'What now?'

'Now the cells.'

'Then?'

'Then we'll see.' He snapped his fingers at the Practicals, jerked his thumb towards the door. Two of them tramped round the table, seized the Queen of merchants by her elbows and bundled her impassively out of the room.

'So,' asked Glokta, looking over at Vissbruck. 'Does anyone else wish to accept the ambassador's offer of surrender?'

The General, who had been standing silently the whole time, snapped his mouth shut, took a deep breath and stood to stiff attention. 'I am a simple soldier. Of course I will obey any order from his Majesty, or his Majesty's chosen representative. If the order is to hold Dagoska to the last man, I will give the last drop of my blood to do it. I assure you that I knew nothing of any plot. I acted rashly, perhaps, but at all times honestly, in what I felt were the best interests of—'

Glokta waved his hand. 'I am convinced. Bored, but convinced.' *I have already lost half the ruling council today. To lose any more might make me look greedy.* 'The Gurmish will no doubt make their assault at first light. You should look to our defences, General.'

Vissbruck closed his eyes, swallowed, wiped some sweat from his forehead. 'You will not regret your faith in me, Superior.'

'I trust that I will not. Go.'

The General hurried from the room, as though worried that Glokta might change his mind, and the rest of the Practicals followed him. Vitari bent and lifted Vurms' fallen chair and slid it carefully back under the table.

'A neat job.' She nodded slowly to herself. 'Very neat. I'm happy to say I was right about you all along.'

Glokta snorted. 'Your approval is worth less to me than you can ever know.'

Her eyes smiled at him above her mask. 'I didn't say that I approved. I just said that it was neat,' and she turned and sauntered out into the hallway.

That only left him and Cosca. The mercenary leaned against the wall, arms folded carelessly across his breastplate, regarding Glokta with a faint smile. He had not moved the whole time.

'You'd do well in Styria, I think. Very . . . ruthless? Is that the word?'

Anyway,' and he gave a flamboyant shrug, 'I look forward very much to serving with you.' *Until such time as someone offers you more, eh, Cosca?* The mercenary waved a hand at the severed head on the table. 'Would you like me to do something with that?'

'Stick it on the battlements of the land walls, somewhere it can be easily seen. Let the Gurmish understand the strength of our resolve.'

Cosca clicked his tongue. 'Heads on spikes, eh?' He dragged the head off the table by its long beard. 'Never goes out of fashion.'

The doors clicked shut behind him, and Glokta was left alone in the audience chamber. He rubbed at his stiff neck, stretched his stiff leg out beneath the bloody table. *A good day's work, all in all. But the day is over now.* Outside the tall windows, the sun had finally set over Dagoska.

The sky was dark.

Among the Stones

The first traces of dawn were creeping over the plain. A glimmer of light on the undersides of the towering clouds and along the edges of the ancient stones, a muddy flare on the eastern horizon. A sight a man rarely saw, that first grey glow, or one that Jezal had rarely seen anyway. At home he would have been safely in his quarters now, sleeping soundly in a warm bed. None of them had slept last night. They had spent the long, cold hours in silence, sitting in the wind, peering into the dark for shapes out on the plain, and waiting. Waiting for the dawn.

Ninefingers frowned at the rising sun. 'Almost time. Soon they'll be coming.'

'Right,' muttered Jezal numbly.

'Listen to me, now. Stay here, and watch the cart. There's plenty of 'em, and more than likely some will get round the back of us. That's why you're here. You understand?'

Jezal swallowed. His throat was tight with the tension. All he could think about was how unfair it was. How unfair, that he should die so young.

'Alright. Me and her will be round the front of the hill there, in around the stones. Most of 'em will come up that way, I reckon. You get in trouble, you shout for us, but if we don't come, well . . . do what you can. Might be we're busy. Might be we're dead.'

'I'm scared,' said Jezal. He hadn't meant to say it, but it hardly seemed to matter, now.

Ninefingers only nodded, though. 'And me. We're all scared.'

Ferro had a fierce smile on her face as she tightened the straps of her quiver around her chest, pulled the buckle on her sword-belt one notch further, dragged on her archery guard and worked her fingers, twanged at her bow-string, everything neat, and quick, and ready for violence. While she prepared for a fight that would most likely be the death of them all, she looked as Jezal might have done dressing for a night round the taverns of Adua. Yellow eyes shining, excited in the half light, as if she couldn't wait to get started. He had never seen her look happy before. 'She doesn't look scared,' he said.

Ninefingers frowned over at her. 'Well, maybe not her, but she's not an example I'd want to follow.' He watched her for a moment. 'Sometimes, when someone lives in danger for too long, the only time they feel alive is when death's breathing on their shoulder.'

'Right,' muttered Jezal. The sight of the buckle on his own sword-belt, of the grips of his own steels, so proudly polished, made him feel sick now. He swallowed again. Damn it, but his mouth had never been so full of spit.

'Try to think about something else.'

'Like what?'

'Whatever gets you through it. You got family?'

'A father, two brothers. I don't know how much they like me.'

‘Shit on them, then. You got children?’

‘No.’

‘Wife?’

‘No.’ Jezal grimaced. He had done nothing with his life but play cards and make enemies. No one would miss him.

‘A lover then? Don’t tell me there ain’t a girl waiting.’

‘Well, maybe . . .’ But he did not doubt that Ardee would already have found someone else. She had never seemed overly sentimental. Perhaps he should have offered to marry her when he had the chance. At least then someone might have wept for him. ‘What about you?’ he mumbled.

‘What? A family?’ Ninefingers frowned, rubbing grimly at the stump of his middle finger. ‘I did have one. And now I’ve got another. You don’t pick your family, you take what you’re given and you make the best of it.’ He pointed at Ferro, then at Quai. ‘You see her, and him, and you?’ He slapped his hand down on Jezal’s shoulder. ‘That’s my family now, and I don’t plan on losing a brother today, you understand?’

Jezal nodded slowly. You don’t pick your family. You make the best of it. Ugly, stupid, stinking, strange, it hardly seemed to matter now. Ninefingers held out his hand, and Jezal gripped it in his own, as hard as he could.

The Northman grinned. ‘Luck then, Jezal.’

‘And to you.’

Ferro knelt beside one of the pitted stones, her bow in one hand, an arrow nocked and ready. The wind made patterns in the tall grass on the plain below, whipped at the shorter grass on the slope of the hill, plucked at the flights of the seven arrows stuck into the earth in front of her in a row. Seven arrows was all she had left.

Nothing like enough.

She watched them ride up to the base of the hill. She watched them climb from their horses, staring upwards. She watched them tighten the buckles on their scuffed leather armour, ready their weapons. Spears, swords, shields, a bow or two. She counted them. Thirteen. She had been right.

But that wasn’t much of a comfort.

She recognised Finnius, laughing and pointing up at the stones. Bastard. She would shoot him first, if she got the chance, but there was no point risking a shot at this range. They would be coming soon. Crossing the open ground, struggling uphill.

She could shoot them then.

They began to spread out, peering up at the stones over the tops of their shields, their boots rustling in the long grass below. They had not seen her yet. There was one at the front without a shield, pounding up the slope with a fierce grin on his face, a bright sword in each hand.

She drew the string back, unhurried, felt it dig reassuringly into her chin. The arrow took him in the centre of his chest, right through his leather breastplate. He sank to his knees, wincing and gasping. He pushed himself up with one of his swords, took a lurching step. Her second arrow stuck into his body just above the first and he fell to his knees again, dribbled bloody spit

onto the hillside, then rolled onto his back.

But there were plenty more, and still coming on. The nearest one was hunched down behind a big shield, pressing slowly up the slope with it held in front of him, trying not to expose a single inch of flesh. Her arrow thudded into the edge of the heavy wood.

‘Ssss,’ she hissed, snatching another shaft from the earth. She drew back the string again, taking careful aim.

‘Argh!’ he cried, as the arrow stuck him through his exposed ankle. The shield faltered and wobbled, drifted to the side.

Her next shaft arced through the air and caught him cleanly through the neck, just above the shield rim. Blood bubbled down his skin, his eyes went wide and he toppled backwards, the shield sliding down the slope after him with her wasted arrow sticking from it.

But that one had taken too long, and too many shafts. They were well up the hillside now, halfway to the first stones, zig-zagging left and right. She snatched her last two arrows from the earth and slithered through the grass, up the slope. That was all she could do, for now. Ninefingers would have to look after himself.

Logen waited, his back pressed against the stone, trying to keep his breathing quiet. He watched Ferro crawl further up the hill, away from him.

‘Shit,’ he muttered. Outnumbered and in trouble, yet again. He had known this would happen from the first moment he took charge. It always did. Well. He’d fought his way out of scrapes before, and he would fight his way out of this one now. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he’s a fighter.

He heard hurrying footsteps in the grass, and breathless grunting. A man labouring up the hill, just to the left of the stone. Logen held his sword by his right side, fingered the hard metal of the grip, clenched his jaws together. He saw the point of the man’s spear wobble past, then his shield.

He stepped out with a fighting roar, swinging the sword round in a great wide circle. It chopped deep into the man’s shoulder and opened a huge gash across his chest, spraying blood into the air, lifting him off his feet and sending him crashing down the hill, flopping over and over.

‘Still alive!’ Logen panted as he sprinted away up the slope. A spear whistled past and sank into the turf beside him as he slid in behind the next stone. A poor effort, but they’d have plenty more. He peered round the edge. He saw quick shapes, rushing from rock to rock. He licked his lips and hefted the Maker’s sword. There was blood on the dark blade now, blood on the silver letter near the hilt. But there was much more work to do.

He came up the hillside towards her, peering over the top of his shield, ready to block an arrow if it came. No way to get at him from here, he was watching too hard.

She ducked away behind the stone and slipped into the shallow trench she had dug, started crawling. She came up to the far end, just behind another

great rock. She edged round behind it and peered out. She could see him, his side to her, creeping up carefully towards the stone where she had been hiding. It seemed that God was feeling generous today.

Towards her, if not towards him.

The shaft buried itself in his side, just above his waist. He stumbled, stared down at it. She pulled out her last arrow and nocked it. He was trying to pull the first one out when the second one stuck him in the middle of his chest. Right through the heart, she guessed, from the way he fell.

The arrows were gone. Ferro tossed her bow away and drew out the Gurkish sword.

It was time to get close.

Logen stepped round one of the stones and found himself looking straight into a face, close enough almost to feel its breath on his cheek. A young face. A good-looking one, with clean skin and a sharp nose, wide open brown eyes. Logen smashed his forehead into it. The head snapped back and the young man stumbled, enough time for Logen to pull his knife from his belt with his left hand. He let go of his sword, grabbed the edge of the man's shield and tore it out of the way. Brown Eyes' head came up again, blood bubbling from his broken nose, snarling as he pulled back his sword arm for a thrust.

Logen grunted as he stabbed the knife into the man's body. Once, twice, three times. Hard, fast, underhand thrusts that half lifted him off his feet. Blood leaked out from the holes in his guts and over Logen's hands. He groaned, dropped his sword, started to slide down the stone, his legs giving way, and Logen watched him go. A choice between killing and dying is no choice at all. You have to be realistic about these things.

The man sat in the grass, holding his bloody stomach. He looked up at Logen.

'Guh,' he grunted. 'Gurruh.'

'What?'

Nothing else. His brown eyes were glassy.

'Come on!' screamed Ferro. 'Come on, you fucking son of a whore!' She squatted on the grass, ready to spring.

He did not speak her language, but he got the gist. His spear arced spinning through the air. Not a bad throw. She moved to the side and it clattered away into the stones.

She laughed at him and he came charging – a big, bald, bull of a man. Fifteen strides away and she could see the grain on the handle of his axe. Twelve strides, and she could see the creases on his snarling face, the lines at the corners of his eyes, across the bridge of his nose. Eight strides, and she could see the scratches on his leather breastplate. Five strides, and he raised his axe high. 'Thaargh!' he squealed as the grass in front of her suddenly collapsed beneath his feet and he pitched flailing into one of the pits, the weapon flying from his hand.

Should have watched where he stepped.

She sprang forward hungrily, swinging the sword without looking. He yelled as the heavy blade bit deep into his shoulder, squealed and gibbered, trying to get away, scrambling at the loose earth. The sword chopped a hole in the top of his head and he gurgled, thrashed, slid down into the bottom of the pit. The grave. His grave.

He did not deserve one, but never mind. She could drag him out later, and let him rot on the hillside.

He was a big bastard, this one. A great, fat giant of a man, half a head taller than Logen. He had a huge club, big as half a tree, but he threw it around easily enough, shouting and roaring like a madman, little eyes rolling with fury in his pudgy face. Logen dodged and tottered between the stones. Not easy, trying to keep one eye on the ground behind him and one on that huge flailing tree limb. Not easy. Something was bound to go wrong.

Logen stumbled on something. The boot of the brown-eyed man he'd killed a minute before. There's justice for you. He righted himself just in time to see the giant's fist crack him in the mouth. He waddled, dizzy, spitting blood. He saw the club swinging at him and he leaped back. Not far enough. The very tip of the great lump of wood clipped Logen's thigh and nearly dragged him off his feet. He staggered against one of the stones, squawking and dribbling and grimacing from the pain, fumbled his sword and nearly stabbed himself with it, snatched it up just in time to tumble and fall on his back as the club smashed away a great chunk of rock beside him.

The giant lifted his club high over his head, bellowing like a bull. A fearsome move, perhaps, but not a clever one. Logen sat up and stabbed him through his gut, the dark blade sliding right up to the hilt almost, clean through his back. The club dropped from his hands and thudded on the turf behind him, but with some last desperate effort he leaned down, grabbed hold of a fistful of Logen's shirt and hauled him close, roaring and baring his bloody teeth. He started to raise his great ham of a fist.

Logen pulled the knife out of his boot and rammed the blade into the side of the giant's neck. He looked surprised, for just a moment, then blood dribbled from his mouth and down his chin. He let go of Logen's shirt, stumbled back, spun slowly round, bounced off one of the stones and crashed on his face. Seemed that Logen's father had been right. You can never have too many knives.

Ferro heard the bow string, but by then it was too late. She felt the arrow pierce her through the back of her shoulder, and when she looked down she could see the point sticking out the front of her shirt. It made her arm numb. Dark blood leaked out into the dirty cloth. She hissed to herself as she ducked behind one of the stones.

She still had the sword though, and one good arm to use it. She slithered round the rock, the rough surface scraping at her back, listening. She could

heard the archer's footfalls in the grass, searching for her, the soft ringing as he drew a blade. She saw him now, his back to her, looking right and left.

She jumped at him with the sword, but he turned in time and caught the blade on his own. They crashed down into the grass together and rolled over in a tangle. He scrambled up, thrashing and screaming, clutching at his bloody face. The arrow sticking from her shoulder had stabbed him through the eye as they struggled on the floor.

Lucky for her.

She sprang forward and the Gurkish sword chopped his foot out from under him. He screamed again, falling onto his side, mangled leg flopping. He was just pushing himself up when the curved blade hacked halfway through his neck from behind. Ferro scrambled through the grass, away from the body, her left arm hanging nearly useless, her right fist gripped tight around the grip of the sword.

Looking for more work.

Finnius moved this way and that, dancing around, light on his feet. He had a big square shield on his left arm, a short, thick sword in the other hand. He twirled it around as he moved, watery sun flashing on the edge, grinning all the while, long hair flapping round his face in the wind.

Logen was too tired to move much, so he just stood there and caught his breath, the Maker's sword hanging down by his side.

'What happened to your sorcerer?' grinned Finnus. 'No tricks this time, eh?'

'No tricks.'

'Well, you've led us a merry dance, I'll give you that, but we got here in the end.'

'Got where?' Logen looked down at the corpse of the brown-eyed man, sat against the stone beside him. 'If this was what you wanted you could have killed yourselves days ago and saved me the trouble.'

Finnus frowned. 'You'll find I'm made of different stuff from these fools, Northman.'

'We're all made of the same stuff. I don't need to carve another body to find that out.' Logen stretched his neck out, hefted the Maker's sword in his hand. 'But if you're set on showing me your contents, I'll not disappoint you.'

'Alright, then!' Finnus started forward. 'If you're that keen to see hell!'

He came on fast and hard, the shield up in front of him, herding Logen through the stones, jabbing and chopping quick with the sword. Logen stumbled back, short of breath, looking for an opening but not finding one.

The shield barged into his chest and knocked his breath out, pressed him back. He tried to dodge away but he lurched on his weak leg, and the short sword darted out and caught him across the arm. 'Gah!' squawked Logen, staggering against a stone, drops of blood pattering from the cut into the grass.

'One to me!' chuckled Finnus, dancing sideways and waving his sword around.

Logen stood and watched him, breathing hard. The shield was a big one and this smiling bastard used it well. Gave him quite the advantage. He was quick,

no doubt. Quicker than Logen, now, with a bad leg, a cut arm and a thick head from a punch in the mouth. Where was the Bloody-Nine when you wanted him? Logen spat on the ground. This fight he'd have to win alone.

He edged back, stooping more and panting harder than he needed to, letting his arm dangle as if it was useless, blood dripping from his limp fingers, blinking and wincing. He edged back past the stones into a space with more room. A nice wide space, where he could get a decent swing. Finnius followed him, shield held up in front. 'That it?' he grinned as he came on. 'Already fading, eh? I can't say I'm not disappointed, I was hoping for a—'

Logen roared, springing suddenly forward and lifting the Maker's sword above his head in both hands. Finnius scrambled back, but not quite far enough. The grey blade tore a chunk from the corner of his shield, sliced clean through and chopped deep into the side of one of the stones with a mighty clang, sending chips of rock spinning. The impact nearly tore the sword from Logen's hands, sent him flailing sideways.

Finnius groaned. Blood was running from a cut on his shoulder, a cut right through his leather armour and into the flesh. The tip of the sword must have gashed him as it passed. Not deep enough to kill, unfortunately, but deep enough to make the point alright.

It was Logen's turn to grin. 'That it?'

They moved at the same moment. The two blades clanged together, but Logen's grip was the stronger. Finnius' sword twittered as it spun from his hand and away down the hillside. He gasped, snatching at his belt for a dagger, but before he could get there Logen was on him, growling and grunting as he chopped mindlessly away at the shield, hacking great scars in the wood and sending splinters flying, driving Finnius stumbling away. One last blow crashed into the shield and he staggered from the force of it, tripped over the corner of a fallen stone poking through the grass and tumbled onto his back. Logen gritted his teeth and swung the Maker's sword down.

It sliced clean through the greave on Finnius' shin and took his foot off just above the ankle, splattering blood into the grass. He dragged himself backwards, started to scramble up, shrieked as he tried to put his weight on his missing foot, dropped onto the stump and sprawled on his back again, coughing and groaning.

'My foot!' he wailed.

'Put it out of your mind,' growled Logen, kicking the dead thing out of his way and stepping forward.

'Wait!' gurgled Finnius, shoving himself back through the grass with his good leg towards one of the standing stones, leaving a bloody trail behind him.

'For what?'

'Just wait!' He dragged himself up the rock, hopped on his remaining foot, cringing away. 'Wait!' he screamed.

Logen's sword caught the inside rim of the shield, tore the straps away from Finnius' limp arm and flung it bouncing down the slope on its chewed-up edge. Finnius gave a desperate wail and pulled out his knife, poised himself on his one good leg to lunge. Logen chopped a great gash in his chest. Blood sprayed out and showered down his breastplate. His eyes bulged, he opened

his mouth wide but all that came out was a gentle wheeze. The dagger dropped from his fingers and fell silently into the grass. He slid sideways and dropped onto his face.

Back to the mud with that.

Logen stood, and blinked, and breathed. The cut on his arm was starting to sting like fire, his leg was aching, his breath was coming in ragged gasps. 'Still alive,' he muttered to himself. 'Still alive.' He closed his eyes for a moment.

'Shit,' he gasped. The others. He started to hobble back up the slope towards the summit.

The arrow in her shoulder had made her slow. Her shirt was wet with blood and she was getting thirsty, and stiff, and sluggish. He slid out from behind one of the stones, and before she knew it he was on her.

There was no room to use the sword any longer, so she let it drop. She made a grab for her knife but he caught her by the wrist, and he was strong. He threw her back against the stone and her head cracked against it, made her dizzy for a moment. She could see a muscle trembling under his eye, the black pores on his nose, the fibres standing out on his neck.

She twisted and struggled, but his weight bore down on her. She snarled and spat, but even Ferro's strength was not endless. Her arms trembled, her elbows bent. His hand found her throat, and tightened round it. He muttered something through clenched teeth, squeezing and squeezing. She could not breathe any longer, and the strength was ebbing out of her.

Then, through her half-closed eyes, she saw a hand slither round his face from behind. A big, pale, three-fingered hand, caked with dry blood. A big, pale forearm followed it, and another, from the other side, folding his head tightly. He wriggled, and struggled, but there was no escape. The thick sinews flexed and squirmed under the skin and the pale fingers dug into his face, dragging his head back and to the side, further and further. He let go of Ferro, and she sagged against the stone, sucking in air. He scrabbled uselessly at the arms with his fingernails. He made a long, strange hissing sound as his head was twisted relentlessly round.

'Ssssss . . .' Crunch.

The arms let go and he crumpled on the floor, head hanging. Ninefingers stood behind. There was dry blood across his face, blood on his hands, blood soaked through his torn clothes. His face was pale and twitchy, streaked with dirt and sweat.

'You alright?'

'About like you,' she croaked. 'Any left?'

He put one hand on the stone beside her and leaned over, spat blood out onto the grass. 'Don't know. Couple, maybe.'

She squinted up at the summit of the hill. 'Up there?' 'Could be.'

She bent and snatched the curved sword up from the grass, started to limp up the slope, using it like a crutch. She heard Ninefingers struggling after her.

For some minutes now, Jezal had heard occasional shouting, screaming, and clashing of metal on metal. Everything was vague and distant, filtering to his ears through the blustering wind across the hilltop. He had no clue what was happening beyond the circle of stones at the hill's summit, and he was not sure he wanted to know. He strode up and down, his hands opening and closing, and all the while Quai sat on the cart, looking down at Bayaz, silent and infuriatingly calm.

It was then that he saw it. A man's head, rising up over the brow of the hill between two tall stones. Next came his shoulders, then his chest. Another appeared not far away. A second man. Two killers, advancing up the slope towards him.

One of them had piggy eyes and a heavy jaw. The other was thinner, with a tangled thatch of fair hair. They moved cautiously up onto the summit of the hill until they stood within the circle of stones, examining Jezal, and Quai, and the cart with no particular urgency.

Jezal had never fought two men at once before. He had never fought to the death before either, but he tried not to think about that. This was simply a fencing match. Nothing new. He swallowed, and drew his steels. The metal rang reassuringly as it slid out, the familiar weight in his palms was a small comfort. The two men stared at him and Jezal stared back, trying to remember what Ninefingers had told him.

Try to look weak. That, at least, did not present much difficulty. He did not doubt that he appeared suitably scared. It was the most he could do not to turn and run. He backed slowly away towards the cart, licking his lips with a nervousness that was anything but feigned.

Never take an enemy lightly. He looked them over, these two. Strong-looking men, well equipped. They both wore armour of rigid leather, carried square shields. One had a short sword, the other an axe with a heavy blade. Deadly-looking weapons, well worn. Taking them lightly was hardly his problem. They spread out, moving round to either side of him, and he watched them go.

The time comes to act, you strike with no backward glances. The one on Jezal's left came at him. He saw the man snarl, saw him rear up, saw the great unwieldy backswing. It was an absurdly simple matter for him to step out of the way and let it thud into the turf beside him. On an instinct he thrust with his short steel and buried it in the man's side up to the hilt, between his breastplate and his backplate, just under his bottom rib. Even as Jezal was ripping the blade back he was ducking under the other's axe and whipping his long steel across at neck height. He danced past them and spun around, steels held ready, waiting for the referee's call.

The one he had stabbed staggered a step or two, wheezing and grabbing at his side. The other stood there, swaying, his piggy eyes bulging, his hand clutched to his neck. Blood began to pour out between his fingers from his slit throat. They fell almost at the same time, face down, right next to each other.

Jezal frowned at the blood on his long steel. He frowned at the two corpses he had made. Almost without thinking he had killed two men. He should have felt guilty, but he felt numb. No. He felt proud. He felt exhilarated! He looked up at Quai, watching him calmly from the back of the cart.

‘I did it,’ he muttered, and the apprentice nodded slowly. ‘I did it!’ he shouted, waving his bloody short steel in the air.

Quai frowned, and then his eyes went wide. ‘Behind you!’ he shouted, half jumping up out of his seat. Jezal turned, bringing up his steels, saw something moving out of the very corner of his eye.

There was a mighty crunching and his head exploded with brilliant light. Then all was darkness.

The Fruits of Boldness

The Northmen stood on the hill, a thin row of dark figures with the white sky behind them. It was still early, and the sun was nothing more than a bright smear among thick clouds. Patches of half-melted snow were scattered cold and dirty in the hollows of the valley sides, a thin layer of mist was still clinging to the valley floor.

West watched that row of black shapes, and frowned. He did not like the flavour of this. Too many for a scouting, or a foraging party, far too few to mount any challenge, and yet they stayed there on the high ground, watching calmly as Ladisla's army continued its interminable, clumsy deployment in the valley beneath them.

The Prince's staff, and a small detachment of his guards, had made their headquarters on a grassy knoll opposite the Northmen's hill. It had seemed a fine, dry spot when the scouts found it early that morning, well below the enemy perhaps, but still high enough to get a good view of the valley. Since then the passage of thousands of sliding boots, squashing hooves, and churning cartwheels, had ground the wet earth to sticky black muck. West's own boots and those of the other men around were caked with it, their uniforms spattered with it. Even Prince Ladisla's pristine whites had acquired a few smears.

A couple of hundred strides ahead, on lower ground, was the centre of the Union battle line. Four battalions of the King's Own infantry formed the backbone, each one a neat block of bright red cloth and dull steel, looking at this distance as though they had been positioned with a giant ruler. In front of them were a few thin ranks of flatbowmen in their leather jerkins and steel caps; behind were the cavalry, dismounted for the time being, the riders looking strangely ungainly in full armour. Spread out to either side were the haphazard shapes of the levy battalions, with their assortment of mismatched equipment, their officers bellowing and waving their arms, trying to get the gaps to close up, the skewed ranks to straighten, like sheepdogs barking at a flock of wayward sheep.

Ten thousand men, perhaps, all told. Every one of them, West knew, was looking up at that thin screen of Northmen, no doubt with the same nervous mixture of fear and excitement, curiosity and anger that he was feeling at his first sight of the enemy.

They hardly seemed too fearsome through his eye-glass. Shaggy-headed men, dressed in ragged hides and furs, gripping primitive looking weapons. Just what the least imaginative members of the Prince's staff might have been expecting. They scarcely looked like any part of the army that Threetrees had described, and West did not like that. There was no way of knowing what was on the far side of that hill, no reason for those men to be there but to distract them, or draw them on. Not everyone shared his doubts, however.

'They mock us!' snapped Smund, squinting up through his own eye-glass. 'We should give them a taste of Union lances! A swift charge and our horsemen will sweep that rabble aside and carry that hill!' He spoke almost as if the carrying of that hill, irrelevant except for the fact that the Northmen were standing on it, would bring the campaign to a swift and glorious conclusion.

West could do nothing but grit his teeth and shake his head, as he had done a hundred times already today. 'They have the high ground,' he explained, taking care to speak slowly and patiently. 'Poor terrain for a charge, and they may have support. Bethod's main body, for all we know, just over the rise.'

'They look like nothing more than scouts,' muttered Ladisla.

'Looks can lie, your Highness, and that hill is worthless. Time is with us. Marshal Burr will be marching to our aid, while Bethod can expect no help. We have no reason to seek a battle now.'

Smund snorted. 'No reason except that this is a war, and the enemy stand before us on Union soil! You are always carping on the poor state of the men's morale, Colonel!' He jabbed his finger up at the hill. 'What could be more damaging to their spirits than to sit idle in the face of the enemy?'

'A sharp and purposeless defeat?' growled West.

It was an unfortunate chance that one of the Northmen chose that moment to loose an arrow down into the valley. A tiny black sliver sailed up into the sky. It came only from a shortbow. Even with the advantage of height the shaft plopped down harmlessly into open ground a hundred strides or more from the front lines. A singularly pointless gesture, but its effect on Prince Ladisla was immediate.

He abandoned his folding field chair and leaped to his feet. 'Damn them!' he cursed, 'they are mocking us! Issue orders!' He strode up and down, shaking his fist. 'Have the cavalry form up for a charge immediately!'

'Your Highness, I urge you to reconsider—'

'Damn it, West!' The heir to the throne hurled his hat down on the muddy ground. 'You oppose me at every turn! Would your friend Colonel Glokta have hesitated with the enemy before him?'

West swallowed. 'Colonel Glokta was captured by the Gurmish, and caused the deaths of every man under his command.' He bent slowly and picked up the hat, offered it respectfully up to the Prince, wondering all the while whether he had just brought his career to an abrupt end.

Ladisla ground his teeth, breathing hard through his nose, snatched the hat out of West's hand. 'I have made my decision! Mine is the burden of command, and mine alone!' He turned back towards the valley. 'Sound the charge!'

West felt suddenly, terribly tired. It seemed he scarcely had the strength to stand as the confident bugle call rang out in the crisp air, as the horsemen struggled into their saddles, eased forward between the blocks of infantry, trotted down the gentle slope, lances up. They broke into a gallop as they crossed the valley floor, half-obsured in a sea of mist, the thunder of their hoof-beats echoing round the valley. A few scattered arrows fell among them, glancing harmlessly from their heavy armour as they streamed forward. They began to lose momentum as they hit the upward slope, their lines breaking as

they pushed on over the gorse and the broken ground, but the sight of all that weight of steel and horseflesh had its effect on the Northmen above. Their ragged line began to waver, then to break. They turned tail and fled, some of them tossing away their weapons as they disappeared over the brow of the hill.

'That's the damn recipe!' yelled Lord Smund. 'Drive 'em, damn it! Drive 'em!'

'Ride them down!' laughed Prince Ladisla, tearing off his hat again and waving it in the air. A scattering of cheers floated up from the levies in the valley, over the distant hammering of hooves.

'Drive them,' muttered West, clenching his fists. 'Please.'

The riders crested the ridge and gradually disappeared from view. Silence fell over the valley. A long, strange, unexpected silence. A few crows circled overhead, croaking their harsh calls to one another. West would have given anything for their view of the battlefield. The tension was almost unbearable. He strode back and forth while the long minutes stretched out, and still no sign.

'Taking their time, eh?'

Pike was standing right next to him, his daughter just behind. West winced and looked away. He still found it somehow painful to look at that burned face for long, especially coming on him sudden and unannounced. 'What are you two doing here?'

The convict shrugged his shoulders. 'There's plenty for a smith to do before a battle. Even more after it. Not much while the fighting's happening, though.' He grinned, slabs of burned flesh folding up like leather on one side of his face. 'Thought I'd take a look at Union arms in action. Besides, what safer place could there be than the Prince's headquarters?'

'Don't mind us,' muttered Cathil, a thin smile on her face, 'we'll make sure to keep out of your way.'

West frowned. If that was a reference to his being constantly in their way he was in no mood to enjoy it. There was still no sign of the cavalry.

'Where the hell are they?' snapped Smund.

The Prince took a break from chewing down his fingernails. 'Give 'em time, Lord Smund, give 'em time.'

'Why doesn't this mist dry up?' murmured West. There was enough sunlight breaking through the clouds now, but the mist only seemed to be thickening, creeping up the valley towards the archers. 'Damn mist, it'll work against us.'

'That's them!' yelled one of the Prince's staff, shrill with excitement, finger stretched out rigid towards the crest of the hill.

West raised his eye-glass, breathless, scanned quickly across the green line. He saw the spear-points, stiff, and regular, rising slowly over the brow. He felt a surge of relief. Rarely had he been happier to be proved wrong.

'It's them!' yelled Smund, grinning broadly. 'They're back! What did I tell you? They're . . .' Helmets appeared beneath the spear-points, and then mailed shoulders. West felt the relief seeping away, horror creeping up his throat. An organised body of armoured men, their round shields painted with faces, and animals, and trees, and a hundred other patterns, no two alike. More men appeared over the crest of the hill to either side of them. More mailed figures.

Bethod's Carls.

They halted just beyond the highest point of the hill. A scattering of men came forward from the even ranks, knelt in the short grass.

Ladislá lowered his eye-glass. 'Are those . . . ?'

'Flatbows,' muttered West.

The first volley drifted up, gently almost, a shifting grey cloud of bolts, like a flock of well trained birds. They were silent for a moment, then the angry rattling of the bow strings reached West's ears. The bolts began to drop towards the Union lines. They fell among the King's Own, clattered down onto their heavy shields, their heavy armour. There were some cries, a few gaps appeared in their lines.

The mood in the headquarters had turned, in the space of a minute, from brash confidence, to mute surprise, to stupefied dismay. 'They have flatbows?' someone spluttered. West stared at the archers on the hill through his eye-glass, slowly cranking back their bowstrings, pulling bolts from their quivers, fitting them into position. The range had been well judged. Not only did they have flatbows, but they knew how to use them. West hurried over to Prince Ladislá, who was gaping at a wounded man being carried, head lolling, from between the ranks of the King's Own.

'Your Highness, we must advance and close the distance so that our archers can return fire, or withdraw to higher ground!' Ladislá only stared at him, giving no sign that he had heard, let alone understood. A second volley arced down into the infantry in front of them. This time it fell among the levies, a unit without shields or armour. Holes opened up all across the ragged formation, holes filled by the rising mist, and the whole battalion seemed to groan and waver. Some wounded man began to make a thin, animal screeching, and would not stop. 'Your Highness, do we advance, or withdraw?'

'I . . . we . . . ' Ladislá gaped over at Lord Smunden, but for once the young nobleman was at a loss for words. He looked even more stupefied than the Prince, if that was possible. Ladislá's lower lip trembled. 'How . . . I . . . Colonel West, what is your opinion?'

The temptation to remind the Crown Prince that his was the burden of command, and his alone, was almost overpowering, but West bit his tongue. Without some sense of purpose, this rag-tag army might swiftly dissolve. Better to do the wrong thing, than nothing at all. He turned to the nearest bugler. 'Sound the retreat!' he roared.

The bugles called the withdrawal: blaring, discordant. Hard to believe they were the same instruments that had so brazenly called the charge just a few short minutes before. The battalions began to edge slowly backwards. Another volley fell among the levies, and another. Their formations were beginning to come apart, men hurrying backwards to escape the murderous fire, stumbling over each other, ranks dissolving into mobs, the air full of shrieks and confusion. West could scarcely tell where the next set of flatbow bolts fell, the mist had risen so high. The Union battalions had become nothing more than wobbling spears and the odd insubstantial helmet above a grey cloud. Even here, high up among the baggage, the mist was curling round West's ankles.

Up on the hill the Carls began to move. They thrust their weapons in the air and clashed them against their painted shields. They gave a great shout, but

not the deep roar that West might have expected. Instead, a weird and chilling howl floated over the valley, a keening wail that cut through the rattling and scraping of metal and into the ears of those watching, down below. A mindless, a furious, a primitive sound. A sound made by monsters, not by men.

Prince Ladisla and his staff gawped at one another, and stuttered, and stared, as the Carls began to tramp down the hill, rank upon rank of them, towards the thickening mist in the valley's bottom where the Union troops were still blindly trying to pull back. West shouldered his way through the frozen officers to the bugler.

'Battle lines!'

The lad turned from staring at the advancing Northmen to staring at West, his bugle hanging from his nerveless fingers.

'Lines!' roared a voice from behind. 'Form lines!' It was Pike, bellowing loud enough to match any drill sergeant. The bugler snapped his instrument to his lips and blew lines for all he was worth. Answering calls echoed through the mist, risen up all around them, now. Muffled bugles, muffled shouts.

'Halt and form up!'

'Form lines now, lads!'

'Prepare!'

'Steady!'

A chorus of rattles and clanks came through the murk. Men moving in armour, spears being set, swords drawn, calls from man to man and from unit to unit. Above all, growing steadily louder, the unearthly howling of the Northmen as they began their charge, surging down from the high ground and into the valley. West felt a chill in his own blood, even with a hundred strides of earth and a few thousand armed men between him and the enemy. He could well imagine the fear those in the front lines were feeling now, as the shapes of the Carls began to rise out of the mist before them, screaming their war cries with their weapons held high.

There was no sound that signified the moment of contact. The clattering grew louder and louder, the shouts and the howls were joined by high-pitched cries, low-pitched growls, shrieks of pain or rage mixed into the terrifying din with ever greater frequency. Nobody in the headquarters spoke. Every man, West among them, was peering into the murk, straining with every sense to get some hint of what might be happening just before them in the valley.

'There!' someone shouted. A faint figure was moving through the gloom ahead. All eyes were fixed on it as it took shape before them. A young, breathless, mud-splattered and highly confused lieutenant. 'Where the hell is the headquarters?' he shouted as he stumbled up the slope towards them.

'This is it.'

The man gave West a flamboyant salute. 'Your Highness—'

'I am Ladisla,' snapped the real Prince. The man turned, bewildered, began to salute once more. 'Speak your message, man!'

'Of course, sir, your Highness, Major Bodzin has sent me to tell you that his battalion is heavily engaged, and . . .' he was still gasping for breath, 'he needs reinforcement.'

Ladisla stared at the young man as though he had been speaking in a

foreign language. He looked at West. 'Who is Major Bodzin?'

'Commander of the first battalion of the Stariksa levies, your Highness, on our left wing.'

'Left wing, I see . . . er . . .'

A semi-circle of brightly dressed staff officers had congealed around the breathless lieutenant. 'Tell the Major to hold!' shouted one of them.

'Yes!' said Ladisla, 'tell your Major to hold, and to, er, to drive back the enemy. Yes indeed!' He was warming to his role now. 'To drive them back, and to fight to the last man! Tell Major Clodzin that help is on the way. Most definitely . . . on the way!' And the Prince strode off manfully.

The young Lieutenant turned, peered into the murk. 'Which way is my unit?' he muttered.

More figures were already beginning to take form. Running figures, scrambling through the mud, panting for breath. Levies, West saw straight away, broken from the backs of crumbling units as soon as they had made contact with the enemy. As though there had ever been any chance that they would stand for long.

'Cowardly dogs!' cursed Smund at their receding backs. 'Get back here!' He might as well have given orders to the mist. Everyone was running: deserters, adjutants, messengers seeking for help, for direction, for reinforcement. The first wounded too. Some were limping under their own power, or using broken spears for crutches, some were half-carried by comrades. Pike started forward to help a pale fellow with a flatbow bolt sticking from his shoulder. Another casualty was dragged past on a stretcher, muttering to himself. His left arm was off just below the elbow, oozing blood through a tightly bound stretch of dirty cloth.

Ladisla looked greasy pale. 'I have a headache. I must sit down. What has become of my field chair?'

West chewed at his lip. He had no inkling of what to do. Burr had sent him with Ladisla for his experience, but he was every bit as clueless as the Prince. Every plan relied on being able actually to see the enemy, or at any rate one's own positions. He stood there, frozen, as useless and frustrated as a blind man in a fist fight.

'What is happening, damn it!' The Prince's voice cut across the din, shrill and petulant. 'Where did this damn mist come from? I demand to know what is happening! Colonel West! Where is the Colonel? What is going on out there?'

If only he had been able to provide an answer. Men stumbled and darted and charged through the muddy headquarters, apparently at random. Faces loomed up from the mist and were gone, faces full of fear, confusion, determination. Runners with garbled messages or garbled orders, soldiers with bloody wounds or no weapons. Disembodied voices floated on the cold air, speaking over one another, anxious, hurried, panicked, agonised.

' . . . Our regiment has made contact with the enemy, and are falling back, or were falling back, I think . . .'

'My knee! Damn it, my knee!'

' . . . His Highness the Prince? I have an urgent message from . . .'

'Send, er . . . someone! Whoever is available . . . who is available?'

‘... King’s Own are heavily engaged! They request permission to withdraw . . .’

‘What happened to the cavalry? Where are the cavalry?’

‘... devils not men! The Captain’s dead and . . .’

‘We are falling back!’

‘... fighting hard on the right wing and in need of support! In desperate need of support . . .’

‘Help me! Somebody, please!’

‘... And then counterattack! We are attacking all across the line . . .’

‘Quiet!’ West could hear something in the grey gloom. The jingling of a harness. The mist was so dense now that he could see no more than thirty strides, but the sound of trotting hooves drawing closer was unmistakable. His hand closed round the hilt of his sword.

‘The cavalry, they’ve returned!’ Lord Smund started eagerly forwards.

‘Wait!’ hissed West, to no effect. His eyes strained into the grey. He saw the outlines of horsemen, coming steadily through the gloom. The shapes of their armour, of their saddles, of their helmets were those of the King’s Own, and yet there was something in the way they rode – slouching, loose. West drew his sword. ‘Protect the Prince,’ he muttered taking a step towards Ladisla.

‘You there!’ shouted Lord Smund at the foremost horseman. ‘Prepare your men for another—’ The rider’s sword chopped into his skull with a hollow clicking sound. A spray of blood went up, black in the white mist, and the horsemen broke into a charge, screaming at the tops of their voices. Terrifying, eerie, inhuman sounds. Smund’s limp body was flung out of the way by the leading horse, trampled under the flailing hooves of the one beside it. Northmen, now, unmistakably, growing more horrifyingly distinct as they loomed up out of the murk. The foremost of them had a thick beard, long hair streaming out from beneath an ill-fitting Union helmet, yellow teeth bared, eyes of horse and rider both wide with fury. His heavy sword flashed down and hacked one of the Prince’s guards between the shoulder blades as he dropped his spear and turned to run.

‘Protect the Prince!’ screamed West. Then it was chaos. Horses thundered past all around, riders yelled, hacked about them with swords and axes, men ran in all directions, slipped, fell, were cut down where they stood, were trampled where they lay. The heavy air was full of the wind of passing horsemen, flying mud, screams and panic and fear.

West dived out of the way of flailing hooves, sprawled on his face in the muck, slashed uselessly at a passing horse, rolled and spun and gasped at the mist. He had no idea which way he was facing, everything sounded the same, looked the same. ‘Protect the Prince!’ he shouted again, pointlessly, voice hoarse, drowned out in the din, spinning round and round.

‘Over on the left!’ someone shrieked. ‘Form a line!’ There were no lines. There was no left. West stumbled over a body, a hand clutched at his leg and he slashed at it with his sword.

‘Ah.’ He was on his face. His head hurt terribly. Where was he? Fencing practice, perhaps. Had Luthar knocked him down again? That boy was getting too good for him. He stretched for the grip of his sword, lying trampled in the mud. A hand slithered through grass, far away, fingers stretching. He could

hear his own breathing, painfully loud, echoing in his thumping head. Everything was blurred, shifting, mist before his eyes, mist in his eyes. Too late. He could not reach his sword. His head was throbbing. There was mud in his mouth. He rolled over onto his back, slowly, breathing hard, up onto his elbows. He saw a man coming. A Northman, by his shaggy outline. Of course. There was a battle. West watched him walk slowly forward. There was a dark line in his hand. A weapon. Sword, axe, mace, spear, what was the difference? The man took one more unhurried step, planted his boot on West's jacket, and shoved his limp body down into the mud.

Neither of them said anything. No last words. No pithy phrases. No expressions of anger, or remorse, or of victory, or defeat. The Northman raised his weapon.

His body jolted. He lurched forward a step. He blinked and swayed. He half-turned, slowly, stupidly. His head jolted again.

'Got something in . . .' he said, lips fumbling with the words. He felt at the back of his head with his free hand. 'Where's my . . .' He swivelled round, falling sideways, one leg in the air, and crashed onto his side in the muck. Somebody stood behind him. They came close, leaned over. A woman's face. She seemed familiar, somehow.

'You alive?'

Like that, West's mind clicked back into place. He took a great coughing breath, rolled over and grabbed hold of his sword. There were Northmen, Northmen behind their lines! He scrambled to his feet, clawed the blood out of his eyes. They had been tricked! His head was pounding, spinning. Bethod's cavalry, disguised, the Prince's headquarters, overrun! He jerked around, wild-eyed, boot heels slipping in the mud, looking for enemies in the mist, but there was no one. Only him and Cathil. The sound of hooves had faded, the horsemen had passed, at least for now.

He looked down at his steel. The blade was snapped off a few inches from the hilt. Worthless. He let it fall, prised the Northman's dead fingers from his sword and grabbed hold of the hilt, his head thumping all the time. A heavy weapon with a thick, notched blade, but it would serve.

He stared down at the corpse, lying on its side. The man who had been about to kill him. The back of his skull was a caved in mess of red splinters. Cathil had a smith's hammer in her hand. The head was sticky dark with blood and strands of matted hair.

'You killed him.' She had saved his life. They both knew it, so there hardly seemed any point in saying it.

'What do we do now?'

Head for the front lines. That was what the dashing young officer always did in the stories West had read as a boy. March for the sounds of battle. Rally a new unit from stragglers and lead them into the fray, turn the tide of the fighting at the critical moment. Home in time for dinner and medals.

Looking down at the wreckage and the broken corpses the horsemen had left behind, West almost laughed at the idea. It was suddenly too late for heroics, and he knew it. It had been too late for a long time.

The fates of the men down in the valley had been set long ago. When Ladisla chose to cross the river. When Burr set upon his plan. When the Closed

Council decided to send the Crown Prince to win a reputation in the North. When the great noblemen of the Union sent beggars instead of soldiers to fight for their King. A hundred different chances, from days, and weeks, and months before, all coming together here, on this worthless stretch of mud. Chances which neither Burr, nor Ladisla, nor West himself could have predicted or done anything to prevent.

He could make no difference now, no one could. The day was lost.

‘Protect the Prince,’ he muttered.

‘What?’

West began to cast around on the ground, rooting through the scattered junk, rolling over bodies with his dirty hands. A messenger stared up at him, the side of his face split open, bloody pulp hanging out. West retched, covered his mouth, crawled on his hands and knees to the next corpse. One of the Prince’s staff, still with a look of faint surprise on his features. There was a ragged sword cut through the heavy gold braid of his uniform, reaching all the way down to his belly.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Pike’s gruff voice. ‘There’s no time for this!’ The convict had got an axe from somewhere. A heavy northern axe, with blood on the edge. Not a good idea, most likely, for a criminal to have a weapon like that, but West had other worries.

‘We must find Prince Ladisla!’

‘Shit on him!’ hissed Cathil, ‘let’s go!’

West shook off her hand, stumbled to a heap of broken boxes, wiping more blood out of his eye. Somewhere here. Somewhere near here, Ladisla had been standing—

‘No, I beg of you, no!’ squealed a voice. The heir to the throne of the Union was lying on his back in a hollow in the dirt, half-obscured by the twisted corpse of one of his guards. His eyes were squeezed shut, arms crossed in front of his face, white uniform spotted with red blood, caked with black mud. ‘There will be a ransom!’ he whimpered, ‘a ransom! More than you can imagine.’ One eye peered out from between his fingers. He grabbed at West’s hand. ‘Colonel West! Is it you? You’re alive!’

There was no time for pleasantries. ‘Your Highness, we have to go!’

‘Go?’ mumbled Ladisla, his face streaked with tear tracks. ‘But surely . . . you can’t mean . . . have we won?’

West nearly bit his own tongue off. It was bizarre that the task should fall to him, but he had to save the Prince. The vain and useless idiot might not deserve saving but that changed nothing. It was for his own sake that West had to do it, not for Ladisla’s. It was his duty, as a subject to save his future King, as a soldier to save his general, as one man to save another. It was all he could do, now. ‘You are the heir to the throne and cannot be spared.’ West reached down and grabbed the Prince by the elbow.

Ladisla fumbled with his belt. ‘I lost my sword somewhere—’

‘We have no time!’ West hauled him up, fully prepared to carry him if he had to. He struck off through the mist, the two convicts close behind him.

‘Are you sure this is the right way?’ growled Pike.

‘I’m sure.’ He was anything but. The mist was thicker than ever. The pounding in his head and the blood trickling into his eye made it hard to

concentrate. The sounds of fighting seemed to come from all around: clashing and grating metal, groans and wails and yells of fury, all echoing in the mist and seeming one moment far away, the next terrifyingly near. Shapes loomed and moved and swam, vague and threatening outlines, shadows drifting, just out of sight. A rider seemed to rise out of the mist and West gasped and raised his sword. The clouds swirled. It was only a supply cart, laden down with barrels, mule standing still before it, driver sprawled out beside, with a broken spear sticking from his back.

‘This way,’ hissed West, scuttling towards it, trying to keep close to the mud. Carts were good. Carts meant the baggage train, the supplies, the food and the surgeons. Carts meant they were heading up out of the valley, away from the front lines at least, if there still were any such things. West thought about it for a moment. Carts were bad. Carts meant plunder. The Northmen would swarm to them like flies to honey, eager for booty. He pointed off into the mist, away from the empty wagons, the broken barrels, the upended boxes, and the others followed him, silent but for their squelching footfalls, their rasping breath.

They slogged on, over open ground, dirty clumps of wet grass, gently rising. The others passed him, one by one, and he waved them on. Their only chance was to keep moving, but every step was harder than the one before. Blood from the cut on his scalp was tickling away under his hair, down the side of his face. The pain in his head was growing worse, not better. He felt weak, sick, horribly dizzy. He clung to the grip of the heavy sword as though it was keeping him up, bent over double, struggling to stay on his feet.

‘You alright?’ asked Cathil.

‘Keep moving!’ he managed to grunt at her. He could hear hooves, or thought that he could. Fear kept him going, and fear alone. He could see the others, ahead of him, labouring forwards. Prince Ladisla well in front, Pike next, Cathil just ahead, looking back over her shoulder. There was a group of trees, he could see them through the thinning mist. He fixed on their ghostly shapes and made for them, his breath rasping in his throat as he floundered up the slope.

He heard Cathil’s voice. ‘No.’ He turned, horror creeping up his throat. He saw the outline of a rider, not far behind them.

‘Make for the trees!’ he gasped. She didn’t move, so he grabbed her arm and shoved her forwards, fell on his face in the mud as he did it. He rolled over, floundered up, began to stumble away from her, away from the trees, away from safety, sideways across the slope. He watched the Northman take shape as he rode up out of the mist. He had seen West now, was trotting up towards him, his spear lowered.

West carried on creeping sideways, legs burning, lungs burning, using his last grains of strength to lead the rider away. Ladisla was already in the trees. Pike was just sliding into the bushes. Cathil took one last look over her shoulder and followed him. West could go no further. He stopped, crouching on the hillside, too tired even to stand, let alone fight, and watched the Northman come on. The sun had broken through the clouds, was glinting on the blade of his spear. West had no idea what he would do when he arrived. Apart from die.

Then the horseman reared up in his saddle, scrambled at his side. There were feathers there. Grey feathers, blowing in the wind. He let go a short scream. His scream stopped, and he stared at West. There was an arrow-head sticking out of his neck. He dropped his spear and tumbled slowly backwards out of his saddle. His horse trotted past, curved away up the slope, slowed to a walk, and stopped.

West crouched against the wet ground for a moment, unable to understand how he had escaped death. He tottered towards the trees, each stride a vast undertaking, all his joints floppy as a puppet's. He felt his knees give way and he crashed down into the brush. There were strong fingers plucking at the wound on his scalp, words muttered in Northern. 'Ah,' yelled West, prising his eyes open a crack.

'Stop whining.' The Dogman was staring down at him. 'Just a scrape. You got off light. Came right to me, but you're lucky still. I been known to miss.'

'Lucky,' muttered West. He turned over in the wet bracken and stared across the valley between the tree trunks. The mist was finally starting to clear, slowly revealing a trail of broken carts, of broken gear, of broken bodies. All the ugly detritus of a terrible defeat. Or a terrible victory, if you stood with Bethod. A few hundred strides away he watched a man running desperately towards another stand of trees. A cook maybe, by his clothes. A horseman followed him, spear couched in his arm. He missed at the first pass, caught him on the way back and knocked him to the ground. West should have felt horror as he watched the rider trot up and stab the helpless runner with his spear, but he only felt a guilty gladness. Glad that it wasn't him.

There were other figures, other horsemen, moving on the slopes of the valley. Other bloody little dramas, but West could watch no more. He turned away, slid back down into the welcoming safety of the bushes.

The Dogman was chuckling softly to himself. 'Threetrees'll shit when he sees what I've caught me.' He pointed at the strange, exhausted, mud-spattered group one by one. 'Half-dead Colonel West, girl with a bloody hammer, man with a face like the back end of a cook-pot, and this one here, less I'm deceived, is the boy who had charge o' this fucking disaster. By the dead but fate plays some tricks.' He shook his head slowly, grinning down at West as he lay on his back, gasping like a landed fish.

'Threetrees . . . is going . . . to shit.'

One for Dinner

To Arch Lector Sult,

head of his Majesty's Inquisition.

Your Eminence,

I have happy news. The conspiracy is unmasked, and torn up by the roots. Korsten dan Vurms, the son of the Lord Governor, and Carlot dan Eider, the Magister of the Guild of Spicers, were the principals. They will be questioned, and then punished in such a manner that our people will understand the price of treason. It would appear that Davoust fell victim to a Gurkish agent, long hidden within the city. The assassin is still at large, but with the plotters in our power it cannot be long before we catch him.

I have had Lord Governor Vurms placed under close arrest. The treason of the son renders the father unreliable, and he has been a hindrance in the administration of the city in any case. I will send him back to you by the next ship, so that you and your colleagues on the Closed Council may decide his fate. Along with him will come one Inquisitor Harker, responsible for the deaths of two prisoners who might otherwise have rendered us valuable information. I have questioned him, and am fully satisfied he had no part in any plot, but he is nonetheless guilty of incompetence tantamount to treason. I leave his punishment in your hands.

The Gurkish assault came at first light. Picked troops rushed forwards with ready-made bridges and tall ladders, straight across open ground, and were met with a murderous volley from five hundred flatbows ranged along our walls. It was a brave effort, but a rash one, and was repulsed with much slaughter on their side. Only two bold parties made it to our man-made channel, where bridge, ladder, and men were quickly swept away by a fierce current that flows from the sea into the bay at certain times of day, a happy and unforeseen chance of nature.

Gurkish corpses now litter the empty ground between our channel and their lines, and I have ordered our men to fire upon anyone who attempts to offer succour to the wounded. The groans of the dying and the sight of Gurkish bodies rotting in the sun cannot but cause a useful weakening of their morale.

Though the first taste of victory has come to us, in truth, this attack was little more than a first feeling out of our defences. The Gurkish commander but dips his toe in the water, to test the temperature. His next attack, I do not doubt, will be on a different scale altogether. Three mighty catapults, assembled within four hundred strides of our walls, and more than capable of hurling huge stones clean into the Lower City, yet stand silent. Perhaps they hope to take Dagoska intact, but if our resistance holds, this hesitation cannot long continue.

They certainly do not want for men. More Gurkish soldiers pour onto the peninsula every day. The standards of eight legions are now plainly visible above the throng, and we have spotted detachments of savages from every corner of the Kantic continent. A mighty host, perhaps fifty thousand strong or more, is ranged against us. The Gurkish Emperor, Uthman-ul-Dosht, bends all his power against our walls, but we will hold firm.

You will hear from me soon. Until then, I serve and obey.

Sand dan Glokta,

Superior of Dagoska.

Magister Carlot dan Eider, head of the Guild of Spicers, sat in her chair, hands in her lap, and did her best to maintain her dignity. Her skin was pale and oily, there were dark rings under her eyes. Her white garments were stained with the dirt of the cells, her hair had lost its sheen and hung lank and matted across her face. She looked older without her powder and her jewels, but she

still seemed beautiful. *More than ever, in a way. The beauty of the candle flame that has almost burned out.*

'You look tired,' she said.

Glokta raised his brows. 'It has been a trying few days. First there was the questioning of your accomplice Vurms, then the small matter of an assault by the Gurkish army camped outside our walls. You appear somewhat fatigued yourself.'

'The floor of my tiny cell is not that comfortable, and then I have my own worries.' She looked up at Severard and Vitari, leaning against the walls on either side of her, arms folded, masked and implacable. 'Am I going to die in this room?'

Undoubtedly. 'That remains to be seen. Vurms has already told us most of what we need to know. You came to him, you offered him money to forge his father's signature on certain documents, to give orders in his father's name to certain guardsmen, to participate, in short, in the betrayal of the city of Dagoska to the enemies of the Union. He has named everyone involved in your scheme. He has signed his confession. His head, in case you were wondering, is decorating the gate beside that of your friend Islik, the Emperor's ambassador.'

'Both together, on the gate,' sang Severard.

'There are only three things he was not able to give me. Your reasons, your signature, and the identity of the Gurkish spy who killed Superior Davoust. I will have those three from you. Now.'

Magister Eider carefully cleared her throat, carefully smoothed the front of her long gown, sat up as proudly as she could. 'I do not believe that you will torture me. You are not Davoust. You have a conscience.'

The corner of Glokta's mouth twitched slightly. *A brave effort. I do applaud you. But how wrong you are.* 'I have a conscience, but it's a feeble, withered shred of a thing. It couldn't protect you or anyone else from a stiff breeze.' Glokta sighed, long and hard. The room was too hot, too bright, his eyes were sore and twitchy and he rubbed at them slowly as he spoke. 'You could not even guess at the things that I have done. Awful, evil, obscene, the telling of them alone could make you puke.' He shrugged. 'They nag at me from time to time, but I tell myself I had good reasons. The years pass, the unimaginable becomes everyday, the hideous becomes tedious, the unbearable becomes routine. I push it all into the dark corners of my mind, and it's incredible the room back there. Amazing what one can live with.'

Glokta glanced up at Severard's eyes, and Vitari's, glittering hard and pitiless. 'But even supposing you were right, can you seriously pretend that my Practicals would have any such compunction? Well, Severard?'

'Any such a what?'

Glokta gave a sad smile. 'You see. He doesn't even know what one is.' He sagged back in his chair. *Tired. Terribly tired.* He seemed to lack even the energy to lift his hands. 'I have already made all manner of allowances for you. Treason is not normally so gently dealt with. You should have seen the beating that Frost gave to your friend Vurms, and we all know that he was the junior partner in this. He was shitting blood throughout his last few miserable hours. No one has laid a finger on you, yet. I have allowed you to keep your

clothes, your dignity, your humanity. You have one chance to sign your confession, and to answer my questions. One chance to comply utterly and completely. That is the full measure of my conscience.' Gloкта leaned forwards and stabbed at the table with his finger. 'One chance. Then we strip you and start cutting.'

Magister Eider seemed to cave in, all at once. Her shoulders slumped, her head fell, her lip quivered. 'Ask your questions,' she croaked. *A broken woman. Many congratulations, Superior Gloкта. But questions must have answers.*

'Vurms told us who was to be paid, and how much. Certain guards. Certain officials of his father's administration. Himself, of course, a tidy sum. One name was strangely absent from the list. Your own. You, and you alone, asked for nothing. The very Queen of merchants, passing on a certain sale? My mind boggles. What did they offer you? Why did you betray your King and country?'

'Why?' echoed Severard.

'Fucking answer him!' screamed Vitari.

Eider cringed away. 'The Union should never have been here in the first place!' she blurted. 'Greed is all it was! Greed, plain and simple! The Spicers were here before the war, when Dagoska was free. They made fortunes, all of them, but they had to pay taxes to the natives, and how they chafed at that! How much better, they thought, if we owned the city ourselves, if we could make our own rules. How much richer we could be. When the chance came they leaped on it, and my husband was at the front of the queue.'

'And so the Spicers came to rule Dagoska. I am waiting for your reasons, Magister Eider.'

'It was a shambles! The merchants had no interest in running a city, and no skill at doing it. The Union administrators, Vurms and his like, were the scrapings from the barrel, men who were only interested in lining their own pockets. We could have worked with the natives, but we chose to exploit them, and when they spoke out against us we called for the Inquisition, and you beat them and tortured them and hung their leaders in the squares of the Upper City, and soon they despised us as much as they had the Gurmish. Seven years, we have been here, and we have done nothing but evil! It has been an orgy of corruption, and brutality, and waste!' *That much is true. I have seen it for myself.*

'And the irony is, we did not even turn a profit! Even at the start, we made less than before the war! The cost of maintaining the walls, of paying for the mercenaries, without the help of the natives it was crippling!' Eider began to laugh, a desperate, sobbing laughter. 'The Guild is nearly bankrupt, and they brought it on themselves, the idiots! Greed, plain and simple!'

'And then the Gurmish approached you.'

Eider nodded, her lank hair swaying. 'I have many contacts in Gurmish. Merchants with whom I have dealt over the years. They told me that Uthman's first word as Emperor was a solemn oath to take Dagoska, to erase the stain his father had brought upon his nation, that he would never rest until his oath was fulfilled. They told me there were already Gurmish spies within the city, that they knew our weakness. They told me there might be a way to prevent the carnage, if Dagoska could be delivered to them without a fight.'

'Then why did you delay? You had control of Cosca and his mercenaries, before Kahdia's people were armed, before the defences were strengthened, before I even arrived. You could have seized the city, if you had wanted. Why did you need that dolt Vurms?'

Carlot dan Eider's eyes were fixed on the floor. 'As long as Union soldiers held the Citadel, and the city gates, taking them would have meant bloodshed. Vurms could give me the city without a fight. My entire purpose, believe it or not, the purpose you have so ably frustrated, was to avoid killing.'

I do believe it. But that means nothing now. 'Go on.'

'I knew that Vurms could be bought. His father has not long to live, and the post is not hereditary. The son might only have this last chance to profit from his father's position. We fixed a price. We set about the preparations. Then Davoust found out.'

'He meant to inform the Arch Lector.'

Eider gave a sharp laugh. 'He had not your commitment to the cause. He wanted what everyone else wanted. Money, and more than I could raise. I told the Gurmish that the plan was finished. I told them why. The next day Davoust was . . . gone.' She took a deep breath. 'And so there was no going back. We were ready to move, shortly after you arrived. All was arranged. And then . . .' she paused.

'Then?'

'Then you began to strengthen the defences, and Vurms got greedy. He felt that our position was suddenly improved. He demanded more. He threatened to tell you of my plans. I had to go back to the Gurmish to get more. It all took time. Finally we were ready to move again, but by then, it was too late. The chance had passed.' She looked up. 'All greed. But for my husband's greed, we would never have come to Dagoska. But for the Spicers' greed, we might have succeeded here. But for Vurms' greed, we might have given it away, and not a drop of blood spilled over this worthless rock.' She sniffed, and looked back at the floor, her voice growing faint. 'But greed is everywhere.'

'So you agreed to surrender the city. You agreed to betray us.'

'Betray who? There would have been no losers! The merchants could have stepped away quietly! The natives would have been no worse off under Gurmish tyranny than they had been under ours! The Union would have lost nothing but a fraction of its pride, and what is that worth besides the lives of thousands?' Eider stretched forward across the table, her voice growing rough, her eyes wide and shining wet with tears. 'Now what will happen? Tell me that. It will be a massacre! A slaughter! Even if you can hold the city, what will be the price? And you cannot hold it. The Emperor has sworn, and will not be denied. The lives of every man, woman and child in Dagoska are forfeit! For what? So that Arch Lector Sult and his like can point at a map, and say this dot or that is ours? How much death will satisfy him? What were my reasons? What are yours? Why do you do this? Why?'

Glokta's left eye was twitching, and he pressed his hand against it. He stared at the woman opposite through the other. A tear ran down her pale cheek and dripped onto the table. *Why do I do this?*

He shrugged. 'What else is there?'

Severard reached down and slid the paper of confession across the table.

'Sign!' he barked.

'Sign,' hissed Vitari, 'sign, bitch!'

Carlot dan Eider's hand was trembling as she reached for the pen. It rattled against the inside of the inkwell, dripped black spots on the table top, scratched against the paper. There was no flush of triumph. *There never is, but we have one more matter to discuss.*

'Where will I find the Gurmish agent?' Glokta's voice was sharp as a cleaver.

'I don't know. I never knew. Whoever it is will come for you now, as they did for Davoust. Perhaps tonight . . .'

'Why have they waited so long?'

'I told them you were no threat. I told them that Sult would only send someone else . . . I told them I could handle you.' *And so you would have, I do not doubt, were it not for the unexpected generosity of Masters Valint and Balk.*

Glokta leaned forward. 'Who is the Gurmish agent?'

Eider's bottom lip was quivering so badly that her teeth were nearly rattling in her head. 'I don't know,' she whispered.

Vitari smashed her hand down on the table. 'Who? Who? Who is it, bitch? Who?'

'I don't know!'

'Liar!' The Practical's chain rattled over Eider's head and snapped taut around her throat. The one-time Queen of merchants was hauled over the back of her chair, legs kicking at the air, hands fumbling at the chain round her neck, and flung face down onto the floor.

'Liar!' The bridge of Vitari's nose was screwed up with rage, red brows drawn in with effort, eyes narrowed to furious slits. Her boot ground into the back of Eider's head, her back arched, the chain cut white into her clenched fists. Severard looked down on this brutal scene with a slight smile around his eyes, tuneless whistling vaguely audible over the choking, hissing, gurgling of Eider's last breaths.

Glokta licked at his empty gums as he watched her thrashing on the cell floor. *She has to die. There are no options. His Eminence demands harsh punishment. His Eminence demands examples made. His Eminence demands scant mercy.* Glokta's eyelid flickered, his face twitched. The room was airless, hot as a forge. He was damp with sweat, thirsty as hell. He could scarcely draw a breath. He felt almost as if he was the one being strangled.

And the irony is that she is right. My victory is a loss for everyone in Dagoska, one way or another. Already the first fruits of my labours are groaning their last in the waste ground before the city gates. There will be no end to the carnage now. Gurmish, Dagoskan, Union, the bodies will pile up until we're all buried under them, and all my doing. It would be better by far if her scheme had succeeded. It would be better by far if I had died in the Emperor's prisons. Better for the Guild of Spicers, better for the people of Dagoska, better for the Gurmish, for Korsten dan Vurms, for Carlot dan Eider. Better even for me.

Eider's kicking had almost stopped. *One more thing to scrape into the dark corners. One more thing to nag at me when I'm alone. She has to die, whatever the rights and wrongs of it. She has to die.* Her next breath was a muffled rattle. The next was a gentle wheeze. *Almost done now. Almost done.*

'Stop!' barked Glokta. *What?*

Severard looked up sharply. 'What?'

Vitari seemed not to have noticed, the chain was as tight as ever.

'Stop, I said!'

'Why?' she hissed.

Why indeed? 'I give you orders,' he barked, 'not fucking reasons!'

Vitari let go the chain, sneering her disgust, and took her boot off the back of Eider's head. She did not move. Her breathing was shallow, a rustling scarcely audible. *But she is breathing. The Arch Lector will expect an explanation, and a good one. What will my explanation be, I wonder?* 'Take her back to the cells,' he said, leaning on his cane and getting wearily out of his chair. 'We might still find a use for her.'

Glokta stood by the window, frowned out into the night, and watched the wrath of God rain down upon Dagoska. The three huge catapults, ranged far out of bowshot beyond the city walls, had been in action now since the afternoon. It took perhaps an hour for each one to be loaded and made ready. He had watched the procedure through his eye-glass.

First the machine would be aligned, the range would be judged. A group of white robed, bearded engineers would argue with one another, peering through eye-glasses of their own, holding up swinging plumb-lines, fiddling with compasses, and papers, and abacuses, making minute adjustments to the huge bolts that held the catapult in place.

Once they were satisfied, the great arm was bent back into position. A team of twenty horses, well-whipped and well-lathered, was required to lift the enormous counterweight, a block of black iron carved in the shape of a frowning Gurmish face.

Next the huge shot, a barrel not much less than a stride across, was painstakingly manoeuvred into the waiting scoop by a system of pulleys and a team of frowning, bellowing, arm-waving labourers. Then men stepped away, hurried back fearfully. A lone slave was sent slowly forward with a long pole, a burning wad at its end. He placed it to the barrel. Flames leaped up, and somewhere a lever was hauled down, the mighty weight fell, the great arm, long as a pine trunk, cut through the air, and the burning ammunition was flung up towards the clouds. They had been flying up, and roaring down, for hours now, while the sun slowly sank in the west, the sky darkened around them, the hills of the mainland became a black outline in the distance.

Glokta watched as one of the barrels soared, searing bright against the black heavens, the path of it a fizzing line burned into his eye. It seemed to hang over the city for an age, as high almost as the Citadel itself, and then tumbled, crackling from the sky like a meteor, a trail of orange fire blazing behind. It fell to earth in the midst of the Lower City. Liquid flames shot upwards, spouted outwards, pounced hungrily upon the tiny silhouettes of the slum-huts. A few moments later, the thunder-clap of the detonation reached Glokta at his window and made him wince. *Explosive powder. Who could have supposed, when I saw it fizzing on the bench of the Adeptus Chemical, that it might make such an awesome weapon?*

He half-saw, half-imagined, tiny figures rushing here or there, trying to pull

the injured from the burning wreckage, trying to save what they could from their ruined dwellings, chains of ash-blackened natives grimly passing buckets from hand to hand, struggling vainly to contain the spreading inferno. *Those with the least always lose the most in war.* There were fires all across the Lower City now. Glowing, shimmering, flickering in the wind off the sea, reflecting orange, yellow, angry red in the black water. Even up here, the air smelled heavy, oily and choking from the smoke. *Down there it must be hell itself. My congratulations once more, Superior Glokta.*

He turned, aware of someone in the doorway. Shickel, her slight shape black in the lamplight.

'I'm alright,' he murmured, looking back to the majestic, the lurid, the awful spectacle outside the window. *After all, you don't get to see a city burn every day.* But his servant did not leave. She took a step forward into the room.

'You should go, Shickel. I'm expecting a visitor, of a sort, and it could be trouble.'

'A visitor, eh?'

Glokta looked up. Her voice sounded different. Deeper, harder. Her face looked different too, one side in shadow, one side lit in flickering orange from the fires outside the window. A strange expression, teeth half-bared, eyes fixed on Glokta and glittering with a hungry intensity as she padded slowly forward. A fearsome expression, almost. *If I was prone to fear . . .* And the wheels clicked into place.

'You?' he breathed.

'Me.'

You? Glokta could not help himself. He let out a burst of involuntary chuckling. 'Harker had you! That idiot stumbled on you by mistake, and I let you go! And I thought I was the hero!' He could not stop laughing. 'There's a lesson for you, eh? Never do a good turn!'

'I don't need lessons from you, cripple.' She took one more step. Not three strides away from him now.

'Wait!' He held up his hand. 'Just tell me one thing!' She paused, one brow raised, questioning. *Just stay there.* 'What happened to Davoust?'

Shickel smiled. Sharp, clean teeth. 'He never left the room.' She stroked her stomach gently. 'He is here.' Glokta forced himself not to look up as the loop of chain descended slowly from the ceiling. 'And now you can join him.' She got half a step forward before the chain hooked her under the chin and jerked up, dragging her off her feet into the air, hissing and spitting, kicking and thrashing.

Severard sprang up from his hiding-place beneath a table, tried to grab hold of Shickel's flailing legs. He yelped as her bare foot cracked into his face, sent him sprawling across the carpet.

'Shit,' gasped Vitari as Shickel wedged her hand under the chain and began to drag her down from the rafters. 'Shit!' They crashed onto the floor together, struggled for a moment, then Vitari flew through the air, a flailing black shadow in the darkness. She wailed as she crashed into a table in the far corner of the room, flopped senseless on the floor. Severard was still groaning, rolling slowly onto his back in a daze, hands clasped to his mask. Glokta and Shickel were left staring at one another. *Me and my Eater. This is unfortunate.*

He backed against the wall as the girl sprang at him, but she only got a step before Frost barrelled into her at full tilt, crashed on top of her onto the carpet. They lay there for a moment, then she slowly rolled on to her knees, slowly fought her way up to standing, all of the hulking Practical's great weight bearing down on her, slowly took a shuffling step towards Glokta.

The albino's arms were wrapped tight round her, straining with every sinew to drag her away, but she kept moving slowly forward, teeth gritted, one thin arm pinned to her thin body while her free hand clawed out furiously towards Glokta's neck.

'Thhhhhh!' hissed Frost, the muscles in his heavy forearms bulging, his white face screwed up with effort, his pink eyes starting from his head. Still it was not enough. Glokta was pressed back against the wall, watching fascinated as the hand came closer, and closer still, just inches from his throat. *This is very unfortunate.*

'Fuck you!' screamed Severard. His stick whistled down and cracked into the grasping arm, breaking it clean in half. Glokta could see the bones poking through the ripped and bloody skin, and yet the fingers still twitched, reaching for him. The stick cracked into her face and her head snapped back. Blood sprayed out of her nose, her cheek was cut right open. Still she came on. Frost was gasping with the effort of keeping her other arm pinned as she strained forwards, mouth snarling, teeth bared, ready to bite Glokta's throat out.

Severard threw down his stick and grabbed her round the neck, dragging her head backwards, grunting with the effort, veins pulsing on his forehead. It was a bizarre sight, two men, one of them big and strong as a bull, trying desperately to wrestle a slip of a girl to the ground. Slowly, the two Practicals began to drag her back. Severard had one of her feet off the floor. Frost gave a great bellow, lifted her and with one last effort flung her against the wall.

She scrambled at the floor, clawing her way up, broken arm flopping. Vitari growled from the shadows, one of Superior Davoust's heavy chairs raised high in the air. It burst apart over Shickel's head with an almighty crash, and then the three Practicals were on her like hounds on a fox, kicking, punching, grunting with rage.

'Enough!' snapped Glokta. 'We still have questions!' He shuffled up beside the panting Practicals and looked down. Shickel was a broken mess, motionless. A pile of rags, and not even a big one. *Much as when I first found her. How could this girl almost have overcome these three?* Her broken arm was stretched out across the carpet, fingers limp and bloody. *Safe to say no threat to anyone, now.*

Then the arm began to move. The bone slid back into the flesh, made a sickening crunching sound as it straightened out. The fingers twitched, jerked, scratched at the floor, began to slide toward Glokta, reaching for his ankle.

'What is she?' gasped Severard, staring down.

'Get the chains,' said Glokta, cautiously stepping back out of the way. 'Quickly!'

Frost dragged two pairs of great irons clanking from a sack, grunting with the effort of lifting them. They were made for the most powerful and dangerous of prisoners, bands of black iron, thick as a sapling trunk, heavy as

anvils. He squeezed one pair tight shut around her ankles, the other round her wrists, ratchets scraping into place with a reassuring finality.

Meanwhile Vitari had hauled a great length of rattling chain from the sack and was winding it round and round Shickel's limp body while Severard held her up, dragging it tight, winding it round and round again. Two great padlocks completed the job.

They were snapped shut just in time. Shickel suddenly came alive, began thrashing on the floor. She snarled up at Glokta, straining at the chains. Her nose had already snapped back into place, the cut across her face had already closed. *As though she was never hurt at all. So Yulwei spoke the truth.* The chains rattled as she lunged forward with her teeth, and Glokta had to stumble back out of the way.

'It's persistent,' muttered Vitari, shoving her back against the wall with her boot. 'You'd have to give it that.'

'Fools!' hissed Shickel. 'You cannot resist what comes! God's right hand is falling upon this city, and nothing can save it! All your deaths are already written!' A particularly bright detonation flared across the sky, casting orange light onto the Practicals' masked faces. A moment later the thunder of it echoed around the room. Shickel began to laugh, a crazy, grating cackle. 'The Hundred Words are coming! No chains can bind them, no gates can keep them out! They are coming!'

'Perhaps.' Glokta shrugged. 'But they will come too late for you.'

'I am dead already! My body is nothing but dust! It belongs to the Prophet! Try as you might, you will learn nothing from me!'

Glokta smiled. He could almost feel the warmth of the flames, far below, on his face.

'That sounds like a challenge.'

One of Them

Ardee smiled at him, and Jezal smiled back. He grinned like an idiot. He could not help it. He was so happy to be back where things made sense. Now they need never be parted. He wanted only to tell her how much he loved her. How much he missed her. He opened his mouth but she pressed her finger to his lips. Firmly.

‘Shhh.’

She kissed him. Gently at first, then harder.

‘Uh,’ he said.

Her teeth nipped at his lip. Playful, to begin with.

‘Ah,’ he said.

They bit harder, and harder still.

‘Ow!’ he said.

She sucked at his face, her teeth ripping at his skin, scraping on his bones. He tried to scream, but nothing came out. It was dark, his head swam. There was a hideous tugging, an unbearable pulling on his mouth.

‘Got it,’ said a voice. The agonising pressure released.

‘How bad is it?’

‘Not as bad as it looks.’

‘It looks very bad.’

‘Shut up and hold that torch higher.’

‘What’s that?’

‘What?’

‘That there, sticking out?’

‘His jaw, fool, what do you think it is?’

‘I think I’m going to be sick. Healing is not among my remarkable—’

‘Shut your fucking hole and hold the torch up! We’ll have to push it back in!’ Jezal felt something pressing on his face, hard. There was a cracking sound and an unbearable lance of pain stabbed through his jaw and into his neck, like nothing he had ever felt before. He sagged back.

‘I’ll hold it, you move that.’

‘What, this?’

‘Don’t pull his teeth out!’

‘It fell out by itself!’

‘Damn fool pink!’

‘What’s happening?’ said Jezal. But all that came out was a kind of gurgle. His head was throbbing, pulsing, splitting with pain.

‘He’s waking up now!’

‘You stitch then, I’ll hold him.’ There was a pressure round his shoulders, across his chest, folding him tight. His arm hurt. Hurt terribly. He tried to kick

but his leg was agony, he couldn't move it.

'You got him?'

'Yes I've got him! Get stitching!'

Something stabbed into his face. He had not thought the pain could grow any worse. How wrong he had been.

'Get off me!' he bellowed, but all he heard was, 'thugh.'

He struggled, tried to wriggle free, but he was folded tight, and it only made his arm hurt more. The pain in his face got worse. His upper lip, his lower lip, his chin, his cheek. He screamed and screamed and screamed, but heard nothing. Only a quiet wheezing. When he thought his head would surely explode, the pain grew suddenly less.

'Done.'

The grip was released and he lay back, floppy as a rag, helpless. Something turned his head. 'That's good stitching. That's real good. Wish you'd been around when I got these. Might still have my looks.'

'What looks, pink?'

'Huh. Best get started on his arm. Then there's the leg to set an' all.'

'Where did you put that shield?'

'No,' groaned Jezal, 'please . . .' Nothing but a click in his throat.

He could see something now, blurry shapes in the half-light. A face loomed towards him, an ugly face. Bent and broken nose, skin torn and crossed with scars. There was a dark face, just behind it, a face with a long, livid line from eyebrow to chin. He closed his eyes. Even the light seemed painful.

'Good stitching.' A hand patted the side of his face. 'You're one of us, now, boy.'

Jezal lay there, his face a mass of agony, and the horror crept slowly through every limb.

'One of us.'

PART II

'He is not fit for battle that has never seen his own blood flow,
who has not heard his teeth crunch under the blow of an
opponent, or felt the full weight of his adversary upon him.'

Roger of Howden

Heading North

So the Dogman was just lying there on his face, wet to the skin and trying to keep still without freezing solid, looking out across the valley from the trees, and watching Bethod's army marching. He couldn't see that much of them from where he was lying, just a stretch of the track over a ridge, enough to see the Carls tramping by, painted shields bright on their backs, mail glistening with specks of melted snow, spears sticking up high between the tree trunks. Rank after rank of 'em, marching steady.

They were a good way off, but he was taking quite a risk even getting this close. Bethod was just as careful as ever. He'd got men out all around, up on the ridges and the high points, anywhere where he thought someone could get a sight of what he was up to. He'd sent a few scouts south and some others east, hoping to trick anyone was watching, but he hadn't got the Dogman fooled. Not this time. Bethod was heading back the way he'd come. He was heading north.

Dogman breathed in sharp, and gave a long, sad sigh. By the dead, he felt tired. He watched the tiny figures filing past through the pine branches. He'd spent all those years scouting for Bethod, keeping an eye on armies like this one for him, helping him win battles, helping to make him a King, though he'd never dreamed it at the time. In some ways everything had changed. In others it was just the same as ever. Here he was still, face down in the muck with a sore neck from looking up. Ten years older and not a day better off. He could hardly remember what his ambitions used to be, but this hadn't ever been among 'em, he was sure of that. All that wind blown past, all that snow fallen, all that water flowed by. All that fighting, all that marching, all that waste. Logen gone, and Forley gone, and the candle burning down fast on the rest of 'em.

Grim slithered through the frozen scrub beside him, propped himself on his elbows and peered out towards the Carls moving on the road. 'Huh,' he grunted.

'Bethod's moving north,' whispered Dogman.

Grim nodded.

'He's got scouts out all over, but he's heading north, no doubt. We'd best let Threetrees know.'

Another nod.

Dogman lay there in the wet. 'I'm getting tired.'

Grim looked up, lifted an eyebrow.

'All this effort, and for what? Everything the same as ever. Whose side is it we're on now?' Dogman waved his hand over at the men slogging down the road. 'We supposed to fight all this lot? When do we get a rest?'

Grim shrugged his shoulders, squeezed his lips together like he was thinking about it. 'When we're dead?'

And wasn't that the sorry truth.

Took Dogman a while to find the others. They were nowhere near where they should've been by now. Being honest, they weren't far from where they were when he left. Dow was the first one he saw, sat on a big stone with the usual scowl on his face, glaring down into a gully. Dogman came up next to him, saw what he was looking at. The four Southerners, clambering over the rocks, slow and clumsy as new-born calves. Tul and Threetrees were waiting for them at the bottom, looking mighty short on patience.

'Bethod's heading north,' said Dogman.

'Good for him.'

'Not surprised?'

Dow licked his teeth and spat. 'He's beat every clan that dared face him, made himself a King where there wasn't one before, gone to war with the Union and he's giving 'em a kicking. He's turned the world on its head, the bastard. Nothing he does surprises me now.'

'Huh.' Dogman reckoned he was right enough there. 'You lot ain't got far.'

'No we ain't. This is some right fucking baggage you've saddled us with here, and no mistake.' He watched the four of 'em fumbling their way down the gully below, shaking his head like he'd never seen such a waste of flesh. 'Some right fucking baggage.'

'If you're telling me to feel shamed 'cause I saved some lives that day, I don't. What should I have done?' asked Dogman. 'Left 'em to die?'

'That's one idea. We'd be moving twice the speed without 'em, and eating a deal better and all.' He flashed a nasty grin. 'There's only one that I could find a use for.'

Dogman didn't have to ask which one. The girl was at the back. He could hardly see a woman's shape to her, all wrapped up as she was against the cold, but he could guess it was under there, and it made him nervous. Strange thing, having a woman along. Quite the sorry rarity, since they went north over the mountains, all them months ago. Even seeing one seemed like some kind of a guilty treat. Dogman watched her clambering on the rocks, dirty face half turned towards them. Tough-looking girl, he thought. Seemed like she'd had her share of knocks.

'I reckon she'd struggle,' Dow muttered to himself. 'I reckon she'd kick some.'

'Alright, Dow,' snapped Dogman. 'Best calm yourself down, lover. You know how Threetrees feels about all that. You know what happened to his daughter. He'd cut your fucking fruits off if he heard you talking that way.'

'What?' Dow said, all innocence. 'I'm just talking, aren't I? You can't hardly blame me for that. When's the last time any one of us had a woman?'

Dogman frowned. He knew exactly when it was for him. Pretty much the last time he was ever warm. Curled up with Shari in front of the fire, smile on his face wide as the sea. Just before Bethod chucked him and Logen and all the rest of them in chains, then kicked 'em out into exile.

He could still remember that last sight of her, mouth open wide with shock and fright as they dragged him from the blankets, naked and half asleep,

squawking like a rooster that knows it's about to get its neck twisted. It had hurt, to be dragged away from her. Not as bad as Scale kicking him in the fruits had hurt, mind you. A painful night, all in all, one he'd never thought to live through. The sting from the kicks had faded with time, but the ache of losing her never had done, quite.

Dogman remembered the smell of her hair, the sound of her laugh, the feel of her back, pressed warm and soft against his belly while she slept. Well-used memories, picked over and worn thin like a favourite shirt. He remembered it like it was last night. He had to make himself stop thinking about it. 'Don't know that my memory goes back that far,' he grunted.

'Nor mine,' said Dow. 'Ain't you getting tired of fucking your hand?' He peered back down the slope and smacked his lips. Had a light in his eyes that Dogman didn't much like the look of. 'Funny, how you don't miss it so bad until you see it right in front of you. It's like holding out the meat to a hungry man, so close he can smell it. Don't tell me you ain't thinking the same thing.'

Dogman frowned at him. 'I don't reckon I'm thinking quite the same as you are. Stick your cock in the snow if you have to. That should keep you cooled off.'

Dow grinned. 'I'll have to stick it in something soon, I can tell you that.'

'Aaargh!' came a wail from down the slope. Dogman started for his bow, staring to see if some of Bethod's scouts had caught them out. It was just the Prince, slipped and fallen on his arse. Dow watched him rolling on his back, face all squashed up with scorn.

'He's some new kind o' useless, that one, eh? All he does is slow us down to half the rate we need, whine louder than a hog giving birth, eat more 'n his share and shit five times a day.' West was helping him up, trying to brush some of the dirt off his coat. Well, not his coat. The coat that West had given him. Dogman still couldn't see why a clever man would do a damn fool thing like that. Not as cold as it was getting now, middle of winter an' all. 'Why the hell would anyone follow that arsehole?' asked Dow, shaking his head.

'They say his father's the King o' the Union his self.'

'What does it matter whose son y'are, if you ain't worth no more than a turd? I wouldn't piss on him if he was burning, the bastard.' Dogman had to nod. Neither would he.

They were all sat in a circle round where the fire would've been, if Threetrees had let them have one. He wouldn't, of course, for all the Southerners' pleading. He wouldn't, no matter how cold it got. Not with Bethod's scouts about. It would have been good as shouting they were there at the tops of their voices. Dogman and the rest were on one side – Threetrees, Dow and Tul, Grim propped on his elbow like none of this had aught to do with him. The Union were opposite.

Pike and the girl were putting a brave enough face on being cold, tired and hungry. There was something to them told the Dogman they were used to it. West looked like he was near the end of his rope, blowing into his cupped hands like they were about to turn black and fall off. Dogman reckoned he should've kept his coat on, rather than give it to the last of the band.

The Prince was sitting in the midst, holding his chin high, trying to look like he wasn't knackered, covered in dirt, and starting to smell as bad as the rest of 'em. Trying to look like he might be able to give orders that someone might listen to. Dogman reckoned he'd made a mistake there. A crew like his chose leaders because of what they'd done, not whose son they were. They chose leaders with some bones to them, and from that point of view they'd sooner have taken a telling from the girl than from this prick.

'It is high time that we discussed our plans,' he was whining. 'Some of us are labouring in the dark.' Dogman could see Threetrees starting to frown already. He didn't like having to drag this idiot along, let alone pretend he cared a shit for his opinion.

It didn't help much that not everyone could make sense of everyone else. Of the Union, only West spoke Northern. Of the Northmen, only Dogman and Threetrees spoke Union. Tul might've caught the sense of what was being said, more or less. Dow weren't even catching that. As for Grim, well, silence means pretty much the same in every tongue.

'What's he saying now?' growled Dow.

'Something about plans, I reckon,' said Tul back to him.

Dow snorted. 'All an arsehole knows about is shit.' Dogman saw West swallowing. He knew what was being said well enough, and he could tell some folk were running short on patience.

The Prince wasn't near so clever, though. 'It would be useful to know how many days you think it will take us to get to Ostenhorm—'

'We're not going south,' said Threetrees in Northern, before his Highness even finished talking.

West stopped blowing into his hands for a moment. 'We're not?'

'We haven't been since we set out.'

'Why?'

'Because Bethod's heading back north.'

'That's a fact,' said Dogman. 'I seen him today.'

'Why would he turn back?' asked West. 'With Ostenhorm undefended?'

Dogman sighed. 'I didn't stick around to ask. Me and Bethod ain't on the best of terms.'

'I'll tell you why,' sneered Dow. 'Bethod ain't interested in your city. Not yet anyhow.'

'He's interested in breaking you up into pieces small enough to chew on,' said Tul.

Dogman nodded. 'Like that one you was with, that he just finished spitting out the bones of.'

'Excuse me,' snapped the Prince, no idea what was being said, 'but it might help if we continued in the common tongue—'

Threetrees ignored him and carried on in Northern. 'He's going to pull your army into little bits. Then he's going to squash 'em one by one. You think he's going south, so he hopes your Marshal Burr will send some men south. He'll catch 'em napping on his way back north, and if they're few enough he'll cut 'em to pieces like he did those others.'

'Then,' rumbled Tul, 'when all your pretty soldiers are stuck back in the mud or run back across the water . . .'

‘He’ll crack the towns open like nuts in winter, no rush, and his Carls will make free with the contents.’ Dow sucked his teeth, staring across at the girl. Staring like a mean dog might stare at a side of bacon. She stared right back, which was much to her credit, the Dogman thought. He doubted he’d have had the bones to do the same in her position.

‘Bethod’s going north and we’ll be following,’ Threetrees said it in a way that made it clear it weren’t a matter for discussion. ‘Keep an eye on him, hope to move fast and keep ahead, so that if your friend Burr comes blundering through these woods, we can warn him where Bethod’s at before he stumbles on him like a blind man falling down a fucking well.’

The Prince slapped angry at the ground. ‘I demand to know what is being said!’

‘That Bethod is heading north with his army,’ hissed West at him through gritted teeth. ‘And that they intend to follow him.’

‘This is intolerable!’ snapped the fool, tugging at his filthy cuffs. ‘That course of action puts us all in danger! Please inform them that we will be setting out southwards without delay!’

‘That’s settled, then.’ They all turned to see who spoke, and got quite the shock. Grim, talking Union as smooth and even as the Prince himself. ‘You’re going south. We’re going north. I need to piss.’ And he got up and wandered off into the dark. Dogman stared after him, mouth open. Why did he need to learn someone else’s language when he never spoke more than two words together in his own?

‘Very well!’ squawked the Prince, shrill and panicky. ‘I should have expected no better!’

‘Your Highness!’ hissed West at him. ‘We need them! We won’t make it to Ostenhorm or anywhere else without their help!’

The girl’s eyes slid sideways. ‘Do you even know which way south is?’ Dogman stifled a chuckle, but the Prince weren’t laughing.

‘We should head south!’ he snarled, dirty face twitching with anger.

Threetrees snorted. ‘The baggage don’t get a vote, boy, even supposing this was a voting band, which it ain’t.’ He was finally speaking Union, but Dogman didn’t reckon the Prince would be too happy to know what was being said. ‘You had your chance to give the orders, and look where it’s got you. Not to mention those were fools enough to do what you told ’em. You’ll not be adding any of our names to their list, I can tell you that. If you want to follow us, you’d best learn to keep up. If you want to give the orders, well—’

‘South is that way,’ said the Dogman, jerking his thumb into the woods. ‘Good luck.’

Scant Mercy

To Arch Lector Sult,

head of his Majesty's Inquisition.

Your Eminence,

The siege of Dagoska continues. Three days in a row the Gurmish have made assaults against our walls, each one greater in size and determination. They strive to fill in our channel with boulders, to cross it with bridges, to scale our walls and bring rams against our gates. Three times they have attacked and three times we have thrown them back. Their losses have been heavy, but losses they can well afford. The Emperor's soldiers crawl like ants across the peninsula. Still, our men are bold, our defences are strong, our resolve is unshakeable, and Union vessels still ply the bay, keeping us well supplied. Be assured, Dagoska will not fall.

On a subject of lesser importance, you will, no doubt, be pleased to learn that the issue of Magister Eider has been put to rest. I had suspended her sentence while I considered the possibility of using her connection with the Gurmish against them. Unfortunately for her, the chances of such subtle measures bearing fruit have dropped away, leaving us with no further use for her. The sight of a woman's head decorating the battlements might have been detrimental to the morale of our troops. We, after all, are the civilised faction. The one-time Magister of the Guild of Spicers has therefore been dealt with quietly, but, I can assure you, quite finally. Neither one of us need spare her, or her failed conspiracy, any further thought. As always, your Eminence, I serve and obey.

Sand dan Glokta

Superior of Dagoska.

It was quiet down by the water. Quiet, and dark, and still. The gentle waves slapped at the supports of the wharf, the timbers of the boats creaked softly, a cool breeze washed in off the bay, the dark sea glittered in the moonlight under a sky dusted with stars.

You could never guess that a few short hours ago men were dying in their hundreds less than half a mile away. That the air was split with screams of pain and fury. That even now the ruins of two great siege towers are still smouldering beyond the land walls, corpses scattered round them like leaves fallen in autumn . .

‘Thhhhh.’ Glokta felt his neck click as he turned and squinted into the darkness. Practical Frost emerged from the shadows between two dark buildings, peering suspiciously around, herding a prisoner in front of him; someone much smaller, hunched over and wrapped in a cloak with the hood up, arms secured behind them. The two figures crossed the dusty quay and came down the wharf, their footfalls clapping hollow on the wooden planks.

‘Alright, Frost,’ said Glokta as the albino pulled his prisoner up. ‘I don’t think we need that any more.’ The white fist pulled back the cowl.

In the pale moonlight, Carlot dan Eider’s face looked gaunt and wasted, full of sharp edges, with a set of black grazes across her hollow cheek. Her head had been shaved, after the fashion of confessed traitors, and without that weight of hair her skull seemed strangely small, almost child-like, her neck absurdly long and fragile. Especially with a ring of angry bruises round it, the

dark after-images left by the links of Vitari's chain. There was hardly any remnant of the sleek and masterful woman who had taken him by the hand in the Lord Governor's audience chamber, it seemed an age ago. *A few weeks in the darkness, sleeping on the rotten floor of a sweltering cell, not knowing if you'll live another hour – that can ruin the looks. I should know.*

She lifted her chin at him, nostrils wide, eyes gleaming in black shadows. *That mixture of fear and defiance that comes on some people when they know they are about to die.* 'Superior Glokta, I hardly dared hope I would see you again.' Her words might have been jaunty, but there was no disguising the edge of fear in her voice. 'What now? A rock tied round the legs and into the bay? Isn't that all a touch dramatic?'

'It would be, but that isn't what I have in mind.' He looked up at Frost and gave the barest of nods. Eider flinched, squeezing her eyes shut and biting on her lip, hunching her shoulders as she felt the hulking Practical loom up behind her. *Waiting for the crushing blow on the back of the skull? The stabbing point between the shoulder blades? The choking wire across the throat? The terrible anticipation. Which shall it be?* Frost raised his hand. There was a flash of metal in the darkness. Then a gentle clicking as the key slid smoothly into Eider's manacles and unlocked them.

She slowly prised open her eyes, slowly brought her hands round in front of her, blinked down as though she had never seen them before. 'What's this?'

'This is exactly what it appears to be.' He nodded his head down the wharf. 'This is a ship leaving for Westport on the next tide. You have contacts in Westport?'

The tendons in her thin neck fluttered as she swallowed. 'I have contacts everywhere.'

'Good. Then this is me setting you free.'

There was a long silence. 'Free?' She lifted one hand to her head and rubbed absently at her stubby scalp, staring at Glokta for a drawn-out moment. *Not sure whether to believe it, and who can blame her? I'm not sure that I believe it.* 'His Eminence must have mellowed beyond recognition.'

Glokta snorted. 'Not likely. Sult knows nothing about this. If he did, I rather think we both might be swimming with rocks round our ankles.'

Her eyes narrowed. *The merchant Queen judges the bargain.* 'Then what's the price?'

'The price is you're dead. You're forgotten. Put Dagoska from your mind, it's finished. Find some other people to save. The price is you leave the Union and never come back. Not. Ever.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Why?'

Ah, my favourite question. Why do I do this? He shrugged. 'What does it matter? A woman lost in the desert—'

'Should take such water as she is offered, no matter who it comes from. Don't worry. I won't be saying no.' She reached out suddenly and Glokta half-jerked away, but her fingertips only touched him gently on his cheek. They rested there for a moment, while his skin tingled, and his eye twitched, and his neck ached. 'Perhaps,' she whispered, 'if things had been different . . .'

'If I weren't a cripple and you weren't a traitor? Things are as they are.'

She let her hand drop, half smiling. 'Of course they are. I would say I'll see you again—'

'I'd rather you didn't.'

She nodded slowly. 'Then goodbye.' She pulled the hood over her head, throwing her face back into shadow, then brushed past Glokta and walked quickly towards the end of the wharf. He stood, weight on his cane, and watched her go, scratching his cheek slowly where her fingers had rested. *So. To get women to touch you, you need only spare their lives. I should try it more often.*

He turned away, limped a few painful steps onto the dusty quay, peering up into the dark buildings. *I wonder if Practical Vitari is in there somewhere, watching? I wonder if this little episode will find its way into her next report to the Arch Lector?* He felt a sweaty shiver up his aching back. *I won't be putting it in mine, that's sure, but what does it really matter?* He could smell it, as the wind shifted, the smell that seemed to find its way into every corner of the city now. The sharp smell of burning. Of smoke. Of ash. *Of death. Without a miracle, none of us will leave this place alive.* He looked back. Carlot dan Eider was already crossing the gangway. *Well. Perhaps just one of us will.*

'Things are going well,' sang Cosca in his rich Styrian accent, grinning out over the parapet at the carnage beyond the walls. 'A good day's work, yesterday, considering.'

A good day's work. Below them, on the other side of the ditch, the bare earth was scarred and burned, bristling with spent flatbow bolts like stubble on a brown chin. Everywhere, siege equipment lay wrecked and ruined. Broken ladders, fallen barrows spilling rocks, burned and shattered wicker screens, trampled into the hard dirt. The shell of one of the great siege towers was still half standing, a framework of blackened timbers sticking twisted from a heap of ash, scorched and tattered leather flapping in the salt wind.

'We taught those Gurmish fuckers a lesson they won't soon forget, eh, Superior?'

'What lesson?' muttered Severard. *What lesson indeed? The dead learn nothing.* The corpses were dotted about before the Gurmish front line, two hundred strides or so from the land walls. They were scattered across the no-man's-land between, surrounded by a flotsam of broken weapons and armour. They had dropped so heavily just before the ditch that you could almost have walked from the sea on one side of the peninsula to the sea on the other without once stepping on the earth. In a few places they were crowded together into huddled groups. *Where the wounded crawled to take cover behind the dead, then bled to death themselves.*

Glokta had never seen slaughter like it. Not even after the siege of Ulrioch, when the breach had been choked with Union dead, when Gurmish prisoners had been murdered by the score, when the temple had been burned with hundreds of citizens inside. Corpses sagged and lolled and sprawled, some charred with fire, some bent in attitudes of final prayer, some spread out heedless, heads smashed by rocks flung from above. Some had clothes ripped

and rooted through. *Where they tore at their own shirts to check their wounds, hoping they were not fatal. All of them disappointed.*

Flies buzzed in legions around the bodies. Birds of a hundred species hopped and flapped and pecked at the unexpected feast. Even here, high up in the blasting wind, it was starting to reek. *The stuff of nightmares. Of my nightmares for the next few months, I shouldn't wonder. If I last that long.*

Glokta felt his eye twitching, and he blew out a deep breath, stretched his neck from side to side. *Well. We must fight on. It is a little late now for second thoughts.* He peered gingerly over the parapet to take a look down at the ditch, his free hand grasping tight at the pitted stone to keep his balance.

Not good. 'They have nearly filled the channel down below us, and over near the gates.'

'True,' said Cosca cheerfully. 'They drag up their boxes of rocks and try to tip them in. We can only kill them so fast.'

'That channel is our best defence.'

'True again. It was a good idea. But nothing lasts forever.'

'Without it there is nothing to stop the Gurmish mounting ladders, rolling up rams, mining under our walls even. It might be necessary to organise a sortie of some kind, dig it back out.'

Cosca rolled his dark eyes sideways. 'Lowered from the wall by ropes, slaving in the darkness, not two hundred strides from the Gurmish positions? Was that what you had in mind?'

'Something like that.'

'Then I wish you luck with it.'

Glokta snorted. 'I would go, of course.' He tapped his leg with his cane. 'But I'm afraid my days of heroics are far behind me.'

'Lucky for you.'

'Hardly. We should build a barricade behind the gates. That is our weakest point. A half circle, I would guess, some hundred strides across, would make an effective killing ground. If they manage to break through we might still contain them there, long enough to push them back.' *Might . . .*

'Ah, pushing them back.' Cosca scratched at the rash on his neck. 'I'm sure the volunteers will be falling over each other for that duty when the time comes. Still, I'll see it done.'

'You have to admire them.' General Vissbruck strode up to the parapet, his hands clasped tightly behind his impeccably pressed uniform. *I'm surprised he finds the time for presentation, with things as they are. Still, we all cling to what we can.* He shook his head as he peered down at the corpses. 'Some courage, to come at us like this, over and over, against defences so strong and so well manned. I've rarely seen men so willing to give their lives.'

'They have that most strange and dangerous of qualities,' said Cosca. 'They think they're in the right.'

Vissbruck stared sternly out from under his brows. 'It is we who are in the right.'

'If you like.' The mercenary grinned sideways at Glokta. 'But I think the rest of us long ago gave up on the idea that there's any such thing. The plucky Gurmish come on with their barrows . . . and it's my job to shoot them full of arrows!' He barked out a sharp laugh.

'I don't think that's amusing,' snapped Vissbruck. 'A fallen opponent should be treated with respect.'

'Why?'

'Because it could be any one of us rotting in the sun, and probably soon will be.'

Cosca only laughed the louder, and clapped Vissbruck on the arm. 'Now you're getting it! If I've learned one thing from twenty years of warfare, it's that you have to look at the funny side!'

Glokta watched the Styrian chuckling at the battlefield. *Trying to decide when would be the best time to change sides? Trying to work out how good a fight to give the Gurkish before they pay better than I do? There's more than rhymes in that scabby head, but for the moment we cannot do without him.* He glanced at General Vissbruck, who had moved further down the walkway to sulk on his own. *Our plump friend has neither the brains nor the bravery to hold this city for longer than a week.*

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned back to Cosca. 'What?' he snapped.

'Uh,' muttered the mercenary, pointing up into the blue sky. Glokta followed his finger. There was a black spot up there, not far above them, but moving upwards. *What is that? A bird?* It had peaked now, and was coming down. Realisation dawned suddenly. *A stone. A stone from a catapult.*

It grew larger as it fell, tumbling over and over, seeming to move with ridiculous slowness, as if sinking through water, its total silence adding to the sense of unreality. Glokta watched it, open-mouthed. They all did. An air of terrible expectancy settled on the walls. It was impossible to tell exactly where the stone was going to fall. Men began to scatter this way and that along the walkway, clattering, scuffling, gasping and squealing, tossing away weapons.

'Fuck,' whispered Severard, throwing himself face down on the stones.

Glokta looked where he was, his eyes locked on that one dark spot in the bright sky. *Is it coming for me? Several tons of rock, about to splatter my remains across the city? What a ludicrously random way to die.* He felt his mouth twitch up in a faint smile.

There was a deafening crash as a section of parapet was ripped apart nearby, sending out a cloud of dust and flinging chunks of stone into the air. Splinters whizzed around them. A soldier not ten strides away was neatly decapitated by a flying block. His headless body swayed for a moment on its feet before its knees buckled and it toppled backwards off the wall.

The missile crashed down somewhere in the Lower City, smashing through the shacks, bouncing and rolling, flinging shattered timbers up like matchsticks, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. Glokta blinked and swallowed. His ears were still ringing, but he could hear someone shouting. A strange voice. A Styrian accent. Cosca.

'That the best you can do, you fuckers? I'm still here!'

'The Gurkish are bombarding us!' Vissbruck was squealing pointlessly, squatting down behind the parapet with his hands clasped over his head, a layer of light dust across the shoulders of his uniform. 'Solid shot from their catapults!'

'You don't say,' muttered Glokta. There was another mighty crash as a

second rock struck the walls further down and burst apart in a shower of fragments, hurling stones the size of skulls into the water below. The very walkway beneath Glokta's feet seemed to tremble with the force of it.

'They're coming again!' Cosca was roaring at the very top of his voice. 'Man the walls! To the walls!'

Men began to hurry past: natives, mercenaries, Union soldiers, all side by side, cranking their flatbows, handing out bolts, shouting and calling to one another in a confusion of different languages. Cosca moved among them slapping backs, shaking his fist, snarling and laughing with not the slightest sign of fear. *A most inspiring leader, for a half-mad drunkard.*

'Fuck this!' hissed Severard in Glokta's ear. 'I'm no damn soldier!'

'Neither am I, any more, but I can still enjoy a show.' He limped up to the parapet and peered out. This time he saw the catapult's great arm fly up in the distant haze. The distance was poorly judged this time, and it sailed high overhead. Glokta winced at a twinge in his neck as he followed it with his eyes. It crashed down not far short of the Upper City's walls with a deep boom, throwing chunks of stone far into the slums.

A great horn sounded behind the Gurmish lines: a throbbing, rumbling blast. Drums followed behind, thumping together like monstrous footsteps. 'Here they come!' roared Cosca. 'Ready with your bows!' Glokta heard the order echoing across the walls, and a moment later the battlements on the towers bristled with loaded flatbows, the bright points of the bolts glinting in the harsh sun.

The great wicker shields that marked the Gurmish lines began slowly, steadily, to move forwards, edging across the blighted no-man's-land towards them. *And behind, no doubt, Gurmish soldiers crawl like ants.* Glokta's hand clutched the stone of the parapet painfully tight as he watched them come on, his heart beating almost as loud as the Gurmish drums. *Fear, or excitement? Is there a difference? When was the last time I felt such a bittersweet thrill? Speaking before the Open Council? Leading a charge of the King's cavalry? Fighting in the Contest before the roaring crowds?*

The screens were coming steadily closer, still in an even row across the peninsula. *Now a hundred strides, now ninety, now eighty.* He looked sideways at Cosca, still grinning like a madman. *When will he give the order? Sixty, fifty . . .*

'Now!' roared the Styrian. 'Fire!' There was a mighty rattling along the walls as the flatbows were loosed in one great volley, peppering the screens, the ground around them, the corpses, and any Gurmish unlucky enough to be left some part of their body visible. Men knelt behind the parapet and began to reload, fumbling with bolts, cranking handles, sweating and straining. The drum beats had grown faster, more urgent, the screens passed heedless over the scattered bodies. *Not much fun for the men behind, staring down at the corpses beneath their feet, wondering how long before they join them.*

'Oil!' shouted Cosca.

A bottle with a burning wick was flung spinning from a tower on the left. It smashed against one of the wicker screens and lines of fire shot hungrily out across the surface, turning it brown, then black. It began to wobble, to bend, then gradually started to tip over. A soldier ran out howling from behind it, his arm wreathed in bright flames.

The burning screen fell to the ground, exposing a column of Gurmish troops, some pushing barrows full of boulders, others carrying long ladders, others with bows, armour, weapons. They yelled their war-cries, charging forward with their shields raised, shooting arrows up at the battlements, zig-zagging back and forth between the corpses. Men pitched on their faces, riddled with flatbow bolts. Men howled and clutched at wounds. Men crawled, and gurgled, and swore. They pleaded and bellowed defiance. They ran for the rear and were shot in the back.

Up on the walls bows twanged and clanked. More bottles of oil were lit and hurled down. Some men roared and hissed and spat curses, some cowered behind the parapet as arrows zipped up from below, clattering from stone or shooting overhead, occasionally thudding into flesh. Cosca had one foot up on the battlements, utterly careless, leaning out dangerously far and brandishing a notched sword, bellowing something that Glokta could not hear. Everyone was screaming and shouting, attackers and defenders both. *Battle. Chaos. I remember now. How could I ever have enjoyed this?*

Another of the screens was blazing, filling the air with reeking black smoke. Gurmish soldiers spilled out from behind it like bees from a broken hive, milling around on the far side of the ditch, trying to find a spot to foot their ladder. Defenders further down the walls began to hurl chunks of masonry down at them. Another rock from a catapult crashed down far short and ripped a long hole through a Gurmish column, sending bodies and parts of bodies flying.

A soldier was dragged past with an arrow in his eye. 'Is it bad?' he was wailing, 'is it bad?' A moment later a man just beside Glokta squawked as a shaft hit him in the chest. He was spun half round, his flatbow went off and the bolt thudded into his neighbour's neck, right up to the feathers. The two of them fell together right at Glokta's feet, leaking blood across the walkway.

Down at the foot of the walls, a bottle of oil burst apart in the midst of a crowd of Gurmish soldiers, just as they were trying to raise their ladder. A faint tang of cooking meat joined the stinks of rot and wood smoke. Men burned, scrambling and screaming, charging around madly or flinging themselves into the flooded ditch in full armour. *Death by burning or death by drowning. Some choice.*

'You seen enough yet?' Severard's voice hissed in his ear.

'Yes.' More than enough. He left Cosca shouting himself hoarse in Styrian and pushed breathlessly through the press of mercenaries towards the steps. He followed a stretcher down, wincing at every painful step, trying to keep up while a steady stream of men shoved past the other way. *Never thought that I'd be glad to be going down a set of steps again.* His happiness did not last long, however. By the time he reached the bottom his left leg was twitching with the all-too-familiar mixture of agony and numbness.

'Damn it!' he hissed to himself, hopping back against the wall. 'There are casualties more mobile than I am!' He watched the wounded hobbling past, bandaged and bloody.

'This isn't right,' hissed Severard. 'We've done our bit. We found the traitors. What the hell are we still doing here?'

'Fighting for the King's cause beneath you, is it?'

‘Dying for it is.’

Glokta snorted. ‘You think there’s anyone in this whole fucking city enjoying themselves?’ He thought he heard the faint sound of Cosca screaming insults floating down over the clamour of the fighting. ‘Apart from that crazy Styrian of course. Keep an eye on him, eh, Severard? He betrayed Eider, he’ll betray us, especially if things look bleak.’

The Practical stared at him, and for once there was no trace of a smile round his eyes. ‘Do things look bleak?’

‘You were up there.’ Glokta grimaced as he stretched his leg out. ‘They’ve looked better.’

The long, dim hall had once been a temple. When the Gurkish assaults had begun the lightly wounded had been brought here, to be tended to by priests and women. It was an easy place to bring them: down in the Lower City, close to the walls. This part of the slums was mostly empty of civilians now, in any case. *The risks of raging fire and plummeting boulders can quickly render a neighbourhood unpopular.* As the fighting continued the lightly wounded had gone back to the walls, leaving the more serious casualties behind. Those with severed limbs, with deep cuts, with terrible burns, with arrows in the body, lay scattered round the dim arcades on their bloody stretchers. Day by day their numbers had mounted until they choked every part of the floor. The walking wounded were dealt with outside, now. This place was reserved for the ruined, for the maimed. *For the dying.*

Every man had his own special language of agony. Some screamed and howled without end. Some cried out for help, for mercy, for water, for their mothers. Some coughed and gurgled and spat blood. Some wheezed and rattled out their last breaths. *Only the dead are entirely silent.* And there were a lot of them. From time to time you would see them being dragged out, limbs lolling, ready to be wrapped in cheap shrouds and heaped up behind the back wall.

All day, Glokta knew, grim teams of men were busy digging graves for the natives. *According to their firmly-held beliefs. Great pits in the ruins of the slums, good for a dozen corpses at a time.* All night, the same men were busy burning the Union dead. *According to our lack of belief in anything. Up on the bluffs, where the oily smoke will be carried out over the bay. We can only hope it will blow right into the faces of the Gurkish on the other side. One last insult, from us, to them.*

Glokta shuffled slowly through the hall, echoing with the sounds of pain, wiping the sweat from his forehead, peering down at the casualties. Dark-skinned Dagoskans, Styrian mercenaries, pale-skinned Union men, all mixed up together. *People of all nations, all colours, all types, united against the Gurkish, and now dying together, side by side, all equal. My heart would be warmed. If I still had one.* He was vaguely aware of Practical Frost, lurking in the darkness by the wall nearby, eyes moving carefully over the room. *My watchful shadow, here to make sure that no one rewards my efforts on the Arch Lector’s behalf with a fatal head wound of my own.*

A small section at the back of the temple had been curtained off for surgery.

Or as close as they can get here. Hack and slash with saw and knife, legs off at the knee, arms at the shoulder. The loudest screams in the whole place came from behind those dirty curtains. Desperate, slobbering wails. *Hardly any less brutal than what's happening on the other side of the land walls.* Glokta could see Kahdia working through a gap, his white robe spattered, smeared, turned grubby brown with blood. He was squinting down at some glistening meat while he cut away at it with a blade. *The stump of a leg, perhaps?* The screams bubbled to a stop.

'He's dead,' said the Haddish simply, tossing his knife down on the table and wiping his bloody hands on a rag. 'Bring in the next one.' He lifted the curtain and pushed his way through. Then he saw Glokta. 'Ah! The author of our woes! Have you come to feed your guilt, Superior?'

'No. I came to see if I have any.'

'And do you?'

A good question. Do I? He looked down at a young man, lying on dirty straw by the wall, wedged in between two others. His face was waxy pale, eyes glassy, lips moving rapidly as he mumbled some meaningless nonsense to himself. His leg was off just above the knee, the stump bound with a bloody dressing, a belt buckled tight round the thigh. *His chances of survival? Slim to none. A last few hours in agony and squalor, listening to the groans of his fellows. A young life, snuffed out long before his time, and blah, blah, blah.* Glokta raised his eyebrows. He felt nothing but a mild distaste, no more than he might have had the dying man been a heap of rubbish. 'No,' he said.

Kahdia looked down at his own bloody hands. 'Then God has truly blessed you,' he muttered. 'Not everyone has your stomach.'

'I don't know. Your people have been fighting well.'

'Dying well, you mean.'

Glokta's laughter hacked at the heavy air. 'Come now. There's no such thing as dying well.' He glanced round at the endless wounded. 'I'd have thought that you of all people would have learned that by now.'

Kahdia did not laugh. 'How much of this do you think we can stand?'

'Losing heart, eh, Haddish? As with so many things in life, heroic last stands are a great deal more appealing in concept than in reality.' *The dashing young Colonel Glokta could have told us that, dragged away from the bridge with the remains of his leg barely attached, his notions of how the world works radically altered.*

'Your concern is touching, Superior, but I'm used to disappointments. Believe me, I will live with this one. The question remains. How long can we hold out?'

'If the sea lanes stay open and we can be supplied by ship, if the Gurkish cannot find a way round the land walls, if we can stick together and keep our heads, we could hold out here for weeks.'

'Hold out for what?'

Glokta paused. *For what indeed?* 'Perhaps the Gurkish will lose heart.'

'Hah!' snorted Kahdia. 'The Gurkish have no hearts! They did not subdue all Kanta with half measures. No. The Emperor has spoken, and will not be denied.'

'Then we must hope that the war will be quickly settled in the North, and

that Union forces will come to our aid.' *An utterly futile hope. It will be months before matters are settled in Angland. Even when they are, the army will be in no state to fight. We are on our own.*

'And when might we expect such help?'

When the stars go out? When the sky falls in? When I run a mile with a smile on my face? 'If I had all the answers I'd hardly have joined the Inquisition!' snapped Glokta. 'Perhaps you should pray for divine help. A mighty wave to wash the Gurmish away would suit nicely. Who was it told me that miracles happen?'

Kahdia nodded slowly. 'Perhaps we should both pray. I fear there is more chance of aid from my god than your masters.' Another stretcher was carried past, a squealing Styrian stretched out on it with an arrow in his stomach. 'I must go.' Kahdia swept away and the curtain dropped back behind him.

Glokta frowned at it. *And so the doubts begin. The Gurmish slowly tighten their grip on the city. Our doom draws nearer, and every man sees it. A strange thing, death. Far away, you can laugh at it, but as it comes closer it looks worse and worse. Close enough to touch, and no one laughs. Dagoska is full of fear, and the doubts can only grow. Sooner or later someone will try to betray the city to the Gurmish, if only to save their lives, or the lives of those they love. They might well begin by disposing of the troublesome Superior who set this madness in motion . . .*

He felt a sudden touch on his shoulder and he caught his breath and spun round. His leg buckled and he stumbled back against a pillar, almost treading on a gasping native with bandages across his face. Vitari was standing behind him, frowning. 'Damn it!' Glokta bit on his lip with his remaining teeth against a searing spasm in his leg. 'Didn't anyone ever teach you not to sneak up on people?'

'They taught me the opposite. I need to talk to you.'

'Then talk. Just don't touch me again.'

She eyed the wounded. 'Not here. Alone.'

'Oh, come now. What can you have to say to me that you can't say in front of a room full of dying heroes?'

'You'll find out when we get outside.'

A chain around the throat, nice and tight, courtesy of his Eminence? Or merely some chat about the weather? Glokta felt himself smiling. *I can hardly wait to find out.* He held one hand up to Frost and the albino faded back into the shadows, then he limped after Vitari, threading their way through the groaning casualties and out through the door at the back, into the open air. The sharp smell of sweat swapped for the sharp smell of burning, and something else . . .

Long, lozenge shapes were stacked up shoulder high against the wall of the temple, swathed in rough grey cloth, some of it spotted and stained with brown blood. A whole heap of them. Corpses, waiting patiently to be buried. *This morning's harvest. What a wonderfully macabre spot for a pleasant little chat. I could hardly have picked a better.*

'So, how are you enjoying the siege? It's a bit noisy for my taste, but your friend Cosca seems to like it—'

'Where's Eider?'

'What?' snapped Glokta, stalling for time while he thought about how to

answer. I *hardly expected her to find out about that so soon.*

‘Eider. You remember? Dressed like an expensive whore? Adornment to the city’s ruling council? Tried to betray us to the Gurmish? Her cell’s empty. Why?’

‘Oh, her. She’s at sea.’ *True.* ‘With fifty strides of good chain round her.’ *False.* ‘She’s adorning the bottom of the bay now, since you ask.’

Vitari’s orange brows drew in with suspicion. ‘Why wasn’t I told?’

‘I’ve got better things to do than keep you informed. We’ve a war to lose, or hadn’t you noticed?’ Glokta turned away but her hand shot out in front of him and slapped on to the wall, her long arm barring his path.

‘Keeping me informed means keeping Sult informed. If we start telling him different stories—’

‘Where have you been the last few weeks?’ He chuckled as he gestured at the pile of shrouded shapes beside the wall. ‘It’s a funny thing. The closer the Gurmish get to breaking through our walls and murdering every living thing in Dagoska, the less I seem to care about his fucking Eminence! Tell him what you please. You’re boring me.’ He made to push past her arm but found it did not move.

‘What if I were to tell him what you please?’ she whispered.

Glokta frowned. *Now that isn’t boring. Sult’s favourite Practical, sent here to make sure I tread the righteous path, offering deals? A trick? A trap?* Their faces were no more than a foot apart, and he stared hard into her eyes, trying to guess what she was thinking. *Is there just the slightest trace of desperation there? Could the motive be nothing more than simple self-preservation? When you lose the instinct yourself, it’s hard to remember how powerful it is for everyone else.* He felt himself starting to smile. Yes, I see it now. ‘You thought you’d be recalled once the traitors had been found, didn’t you? You thought Sult would arrange a nice little boat home! But now there are no boats for anyone, and you’re worried your kindly uncle’s forgotten all about you! That you’ve been tossed to the Gurmish with the rest of the damn dogmeat!’

Vitari’s eyes narrowed. ‘Let me tell you a secret. I didn’t choose to be here any more than you did, but I learned a long time ago that when Sult tells you to do a thing you’d better look like you did it. All I care about is getting out of here alive.’ She moved even closer. ‘Can we help each other?’

Can we indeed? I wonder. ‘Alright then. I daresay I can squeeze one extra friend into the social whirl that is my life. I’ll see what I can do for you.’

‘You’ll see what you can do?’

‘That’s the best you’ll get. The fact is I’m not much good at helping people. Out of practice, you see.’ He leered his toothless grin in her face, lifted her slack arm out of the way with his cane, then hobbled past the heap of bodies and back towards the temple door.

‘What shall I tell Sult about Eider?’

‘Tell him the truth,’ Glokta called over his shoulder. ‘Tell him she’s dead.’

Tell him we all are.

So This is Pain

‘Where am I?’ asked Jezal, only his jaw would not move. The cart wheels squealed as they turned, everything blinding bright and blurry, sound and light digging into his aching skull.

He tried to swallow, but could not. He tried to raise his head. Pain stabbed through his neck and his stomach heaved.

‘Help!’ he squealed, but nothing came out beyond a bubbling croak. What had happened? Painful sky above, painful boards underneath. He was lying in a cart, head on a scratchy sack, bouncing and jolting.

There had been a fight, he remembered that. A fight among the stones. Someone had called out. A crunch and blinding light, then nothing but pain. Even trying to think was painful. He lifted his arm to feel his face, but found that he couldn’t. He tried to shift his legs, to push himself up, but he couldn’t do that either. He worked his mouth, grunting, moaning.

His tongue was unfamiliar, three times its usual size, like a bloody lump of ham that had been shoved between his jaws, filling his mouth so he could hardly breathe. The right side of his face was a mask of agony. With every lurch of the cart his jaws rattled together, sending white-hot stabs of pain from his teeth into his eyes, his neck, the very roots of his hair. There were bandages over his mouth, he had to breathe through the left side, but even the air moving in his throat was painful.

Panic started to claw at him. Every part of his body was screaming. One arm was bound tight across his chest but he clutched weakly at the side of the cart with the other, trying to do something, anything, his eyes bulging, heart hammering, breath snorting in his nose.

‘Gugh!’ he growled, ‘gurr!’ And the more he tried to speak, the more the pain grew, and grew, until it seemed his face would split, until it seemed his skull would fly apart—

‘Easy.’ A scarred face swam into view above. Ninefingers. Jezal grabbed at him, wildly, and the Northman caught his hand in his own big paw and squeezed it tight. ‘Easy, now, and listen to me. It hurts, yes. Seems like more than you can take, but it isn’t. You think you’re going to die, but you won’t. Listen to me, because I’ve been there, and I know. Each minute. Each hour. Each day, it gets better.’

He felt Ninefingers’ other hand on his shoulder, pushing him gently back down into the cart. ‘All you got to do is lie there, and it gets better. You understand? You got the light duty, you lucky bastard.’

Jezal let his limbs go heavy. All he had to do was lie there. He squeezed the big hand and the hand squeezed back. The pain seemed less. Awful still, but within his control. His breath slowed. His eyes closed.

The wind cut over the cold plain, plucking at the short grass, tugging at Jezal's tattered coat, at his greasy hair, at his dirty bandages, but he ignored it. What could he do about the wind? What could he do about anything?

He sat, his back against the wheel of the cart, and stared down wide-eyed at his leg. A broken length of spear shaft had been strapped to either side, wrapped round and round with strips of torn-up cloth, held firmly and painfully straight. His arm was no better, sandwiched between two slats from a shield and bound tightly across his chest, the white hand dangling, fingers numb and useless as sausages.

Pitiful, improvised efforts at medicine that Jezal could never see working. They might almost have seemed amusing, had he not been the unfortunate patient. He would surely never recover. He was broken, shattered, ruined. Would he be now a cripple of the kind he avoided on the street corners of Adua? War-wounded, ragged and dirty, shoving their stumps in the faces of passers-by, holding their crabbing palms out for coppers, uncomfortable reminders that there was a dark side to soldiering that one would rather not think about?

Would he be now a cripple like . . . and a horrible coldness crept over him . . . like Sand dan Glokta? He tried to shift his leg and groaned at the pain. Would he walk for the rest of his life with a stick? A shambling horror, shunned and avoided? A salutary lesson, pointed at and whispered of? There goes Jezal dan Luthar! He used to be a promising man, a handsome man, he won a Contest and the crowd cheered for him! Who would believe it? What a waste, what a shame, here he comes, let's move on . . .

And that was before he even thought about what his face might look like. He tried to move his tongue and the stab of agony made him grimace, but he could tell there was a terribly unfamiliar geography to the inside of his mouth. It felt slanted, twisted, nothing fitted together as it used to. There was a gap in his teeth that felt a mile wide. His lips tingled unpleasantly under the bandages. Torn, battered, ripped open. He was a monster.

A shadow fell across Jezal's face and he squinted up into the sun. Ninefingers stood over him, a water-skin hanging from one big fist. 'Water,' he grunted. Jezal shook his head but the Northman squatted down, pulled the stopper from the skin and held it out regardless. 'Got to drink. Keep it clean.'

Jezal snatched the skin bad-temperedly from him, lifted it gingerly to the better side of his mouth and tried to tilt it. It hung bloated and baggy. He struggled for a moment, before realising there was no way of drinking with only one good hand. He fell back, eyes closed, snorting through his nose. He almost ground his teeth with frustration, but quickly thought better of it.

'Here.' He felt a hand slide behind his neck and firmly lift his head.

'Gugh!' he grunted furiously, with half a mind to struggle, but in the end he allowed his body to sag, and submitted to the ignominy of being handled like a baby. What was the point, after all, in pretending he was anything other than utterly helpless? Sour, lukewarm water seeped into his mouth, and he tried to force it down. It was like swallowing broken glass. He coughed and spat the rest out. Or he tried to spit and found the pain far too great. He had to lean forward and let it dribble from his face, most of it running down his neck and into the filthy collar of his shirt. He sat back heavily with a moan

and pushed the skin away with his good hand.

Ninefingers shrugged. 'Alright, but you'll have to try again later. Got to keep drinking. You remember what happened?' Jezal shook his head.

'There was a fight. Me and sunshine there,' and he nodded over at Ferro, who scowled back, 'handled most of 'em, but it seems three got around us. You dealt with two, and you did well with that, but you missed one, and he hit you in the mouth with a mace.' He gestured at Jezal's bandaged face. 'Hit you hard, and you're familiar with the outcome. Then you fell, and I'm guessing he hit you when you were down, which is how you got the arm and the leg broke. Could have been a lot worse. If I was you I'd be thanking the dead that Quai was there.'

Jezal blinked over at the apprentice. What did he have to do with anything? But Ninefingers was already answering his question.

'Came up and knocked him on the head with a pan. Well, I say knocked. Smashed his skull to mush, didn't you?' He grinned over at the apprentice, who sat staring out across the plain. 'He hits hard for a thin man, our boy, eh? Shame about that pan, though.'

Quai shrugged as though he stove a man's head in most mornings. Jezal supposed he should be thanking the sickly fool for saving his life, but he didn't feel so very saved. Instead he tried to form the sounds as clearly as he could without hurting himself, making little more than a whisper. 'Ow bad ith it?'

'I've had worse.' Small comfort indeed. 'You'll get through alright. You're young. Arm and leg'll mend quick.' Meaning, Jezal inferred, that his face would not. 'Always tough taking a wound, and never tougher than the first. I cried like a baby at every one of these,' and Ninefingers waved a hand at his battered face. 'Most everyone cries, and that's a fact. If it's any help.'

It was not. 'Ow bad?'

Ninefingers scratched at the thick stubble on the side of his face. 'Your jaw's broke, you lost some teeth, you got your mouth ripped, but we stitched you up pretty good.' Jezal swallowed, hardly able to think. His worst fears seemed to be confirmed. 'It's a hard wound you got there, and a nasty place to get it. In your mouth so you can't eat, can't drink, can't hardly talk without pain. Can't kiss either of course, though that shouldn't be a problem out here, eh?' The Northman grinned but Jezal was in no mood to join him. 'A bad wound, alright. A naming wound they'd call it, where I come from.'

'A wha?' muttered Jezal, immediately regretting it as pain licked at his jaw.

'A naming wound, you know,' and Ninefingers waggled the stump of his finger. 'A wound you could get named after. They'd probably call you Brokejaw, or Bentface or Lackteeth or something.' He smiled again, but Jezal had left his sense of humour on the hill among the stones, along with his broken teeth. He could feel tears stinging at his eyes. He wanted to cry, but that made his mouth stretch, the stitches tug at his bloated lips under the bandages.

Ninefingers made a further effort. 'You got to look at the bright side. It ain't likely to kill you now. If the rot was going to get into it, I reckon it would've already.' Jezal gawped, horrified, eyes going wider and wider as the implications of that last utterance sank in. His jaw would surely have dropped, had it not been shattered and bound tightly to his face. Wasn't likely to kill

him? The possibility of the wound going bad had never even occurred. Rot? In his *mouth*?

‘I’m not helping, am I?’ muttered Logen.

Jezal covered his eyes with his one good hand and tried to weep without hurting himself, silent sobs making his shoulders shake.

They had stopped on the shore of a wide lake. Choppy grey water under a dark sky, heavy with bruises. Brooding water, brooding sky, all seeming full of secrets, full of threats. Sullen waves slapped at the cold shingle. Sullen birds croaked to one another above the water. Sullen pain pulsed through every corner of Jezal’s body, and would not stop.

Ferro squatted down in front of him, frowning, as always, cutting the bandages away while Bayaz stood behind her, looking down. The First of the Magi had woken from his torpor, it seemed. He had given no explanation of what had caused it, or why he had so suddenly recovered, but he still looked ill. Older than ever, and a lot bonier, his eyes sunken, his skin looking somehow thin, pale, almost transparent. But Jezal had no sympathy to spare, especially not for the architect of this disaster.

‘Where are we?’ he muttered, through the twinges. It was less painful to talk than it had been, but he still had to speak quietly, carefully, the words thick and stumbling like some village halfwit’s.

Bayaz nodded over his shoulder towards the great expanse of water. ‘This is the first of the three lakes. We are well on the way to Aulcus. More than half of our journey is behind us, I would say.’

Jezal swallowed. Halfway was hardly the greatest reassurance he could have asked for. ‘How long was—’

‘I can’t work with you flapping your lips, fool,’ hissed Ferro. ‘Do I leave you like this, or do you shut up?’

Jezal shut up. She peeled the dressing carefully from his face, peered down at the brown blood on the cloth, sniffed it, wrinkled her nose and tossed it away, then stared angrily at his mouth for a moment. He swallowed, watching her dark face for any sign of what she might be thinking. He would have given his teeth for a mirror at that moment, if he had still had a full set. ‘How bad is it?’ he muttered at her, tasting blood on his tongue.

She scowled up at him. ‘You’ve confused me with someone who cares.’

A sob coughed up from his throat. Tears stung at his eyes, he had to look away and blink to stop himself crying. He was a pitiable specimen, alright. A brave son of the Union, a bold officer of the King’s Own, a winner of the Contest, no less, and he could scarcely keep from weeping.

‘Hold this,’ snapped Ferro’s voice.

‘Uh,’ he whispered, trying to press the sobs down into his chest and stop them cracking his voice. He held one end of the fresh bandage against his face while she wrapped it round his head and under his jaw, round and round, holding his mouth near shut.

‘You’ll live.’

‘Is that supposed to be a comfort?’ he mumbled.

She shrugged as she turned away. ‘There are plenty who don’t.’

Jezal almost envied them as he watched her stalk off through the waving grass. How he wished Ardee was here. He remembered the last sight of her, looking up at him in the soft rain with that crooked smile. She would never have left him like this, helpless and in pain. She would have spoken soft words, and touched his face, and looked at him with her dark eyes, and kissed him gently, and . . . sentimental shit. Probably she had found some other idiot to tease, and confuse, and make miserable, and had never paid him so much as a second thought. He tortured himself with the thought of her laughing at some other man's jokes, smiling into some other man's face, kissing some other man's mouth. She would never want him now, that was sure. No one would want him. He felt his lip trembling again, his eyes tingling.

'All the great heroes of old, you know – the great kings, the great generals – they all faced adversity from time to time.' Jezal looked up. He had almost forgotten that Bayaz was there. 'Suffering is what gives a man strength, my boy, just as the steel most hammered turns out the hardest.'

The old man winced as he squatted down beside Jezal. 'Anyone can face ease and success with confidence. It is the way we face trouble and misfortune that defines us. Self-pity goes with selfishness, and there is nothing more to be deplored in a leader than that. Selfishness belongs to children, and to halfwits. A great leader puts others before himself. You would be surprised how acting so makes it easier to bear one's own troubles. In order to act like a king, one need only treat everyone else like one.' And he placed a hand on Jezal's shoulder. Perhaps it was supposed to be a fatherly and reassuring touch, but he could feel it trembling through his shirt. Bayaz let it rest there for a moment as though he had not the strength to move it, then pushed himself slowly up, stretched his legs, and shuffled off.

Jezal stared vacantly after him. A few weeks ago he would have been left fuming silently by such a lecture. Now he sat limp and absorbed it meekly. He hardly knew who he was any more. It was difficult to maintain any sense of superiority in the face of his utter dependence on other people. And people of whom, until recently, he had held such a very low opinion. He was no longer under any illusions. Without Ferro's savage doctoring, and Ninefingers' clumsy nursing, he would most likely have been dead.

The Northman was walking over, boots crunching in the shingle. Time to go back in the cart. Time for more squeaking and jolting. Time for more pain. Jezal gave a long, ragged, self-pitying sigh, but stopped himself halfway through. Self-pity was for children and halfwits.

'Alright, you know the drill.' Jezal leaned forward and Ninefingers hooked his arm behind his back, the other under his knees, lifted him up over the side of the cart without even breathing hard and dumped him unceremoniously among the supplies. Jezal caught his big, dirty, three-fingered hand as he was moving away, and the Northman turned to look at him, one heavy brow lifted. Jezal swallowed. 'Thank you,' he muttered.

'What, for this?'

'For everything.'

Ninefingers looked at him for a long moment, then shrugged. 'Nothing to it. You treat folk the way you'd want to be treated, and you can't go far wrong. That's what my father told me. Forgot that advice, for a long time, and I done

things I can never make up for.' He gave a long sigh. 'Still, it doesn't hurt to try. My experience? You get what you give, in the end.'

Jezal blinked at Ninefingers' broad back as he walked over to his horse. You treat folk the way you'd want to be treated. Could Jezal honestly say that he had ever done that much? He thought about it as the cart set off, axles shrieking, carelessly at first, and then with deepening worry.

He had bullied his juniors, pandered to his seniors. He had often screwed money from friends who could not afford it, had taken advantage of girls, then brushed them off. He had never once thanked his friend West for any of his help, and would happily have bedded his sister behind his back if she had let him. He realised, with increasing horror, that he could scarcely think of a single selfless thing that he had ever done.

He shifted uncomfortably against the sacks of fodder in the cart. You get what you give, in the long run, and manners cost nothing. From now on, he would think of others first. He would treat everyone as if they were his equal. But later, of course. There would be plenty of time to be a better man when he could eat again. He touched one hand to the bandages on his face, scratched absently at them then had to stop himself. Bayaz was riding just behind the cart, looking out across the water.

'You saw it?' Jezal muttered at him.

'Saw what?'

'This.' He jabbed a finger at his face.

'Ah, that. Yes, I saw it.'

'How bad is it?'

Bayaz cocked his head on one side. 'Do you know? All in all, I believe I like it.'

'You like it?'

'Not now, perhaps, but the stitches will come out, the swelling will go down, the bruises will fade, the scabs will heal and drop away. I would guess your jaw will never quite regain its shape, and your teeth, of course, will not grow back, but what you lose in boyish charm you will gain, I have no doubt, in a certain danger, a flair, a rugged mystery. People respect a man who has seen action, and your appearance will be very far from ruined. I daresay girls could still be persuaded to swoon for you, if you were to do anything worth swooning over.' He nodded thoughtfully. 'Yes. All in all, I think it will serve.'

'Serve?' muttered Jezal, one hand pressed against his bandages. 'Serve what?'

But Bayaz' mind had wandered off. 'Harod the Great had a scar, you know, across his cheek, and it never did him any harm. You don't see it on the statues, of course, but people respected him the more for it, in life. Truly a great man, Harod. He had a shining reputation for being fair and trustworthy, and indeed he often was. But he knew how not to be, when the situation demanded it.' The Magus chuckled to himself. 'Did I tell you of the time he invited his two greatest enemies to negotiate with him? He had them feuding one with the other before the day was out, and later they destroyed each other's armies in battle, leaving him to claim victory over both without striking a blow. He knew, you see, that Ardlic had a beautiful wife . . .'

Jezal lay back in the cart. Bayaz had, in fact, told him that story before, but

there seemed no purpose in saying so. He was actually enjoying hearing it for a second time, and it was hardly as though there was anything better for him to do. There was something calming in the repetitive droning of the old man's deep voice, especially now the sun was breaking through the clouds. His mouth was barely even hurting, if he kept it still.

So Jezal lay back against a sack of straw, head turned to the side, rocking gently with the movement of the cart, and watched the land slide by. Watched the wind in the grass. Watched the sun on the water.

One Step at a Time

West gritted his teeth as he dragged himself up the freezing slope. His fingers were numb, and weak, and trembling from clawing at the chill earth, the icy tree roots, the freezing snow for handholds. His lips were cracked, his nose was endlessly running, the rims of his nostrils were horribly sore. The very air cut into his throat and nipped at his lungs, smoked back out in tickling wheezes. He wondered if giving his coat to Ladisla had been the worst decision of his life. He decided it probably had been. Except for saving the selfish bastard in the first place, of course.

Even when he had been training for the Contest, five hours a day, he had never imagined that he could be so tired. Next to Threetrees, Lord Marshal Varuz seemed an almost laughably soft taskmaster. West was shaken awake before dawn every morning and scarcely allowed to rest until after the last light faded. The Northmen were machines, every one of them. Men carved from wood who never got tired, who felt no pain. Every one of West's muscles ached from their merciless pace. He was covered in bruises and scratches from a hundred falls and scrambles. His feet were raw and blistered in his wet boots. Then there was the familiar pulsing in the head, throbbing away to the rhythm of his laboured heartbeat, mingling unpleasantly with the burning of the wound on his scalp.

The cold, the pain, and the fatigue were bad enough, but still worse was the overwhelming sense of shame, and guilt, and failure that crushed him down with every step. He had been sent with Ladisla to make sure there were no disasters. The result had been a disaster on a scale almost incomprehensible. An entire division massacred. How many children without fathers? How many wives without husbands? How many parents without sons? If only he could have done more, he told himself for the thousandth time, bunching his bloodless hands into fists. If only he could have convinced the Prince to stay behind the river, all those men might not be dead. So many dead. He hardly knew whether to pity or envy them.

'One step at a time,' he muttered to himself as he clambered up the slope. That was the only way to look at it. If you clenched your teeth hard enough, and took enough strides, you could get anywhere. One painful, weary, freezing, guilty step at a time. What else could you do?

No sooner had they finally made it to the top of the hill than Prince Ladisla flung himself down against the roots of a tree, as he did at least once an hour. 'Colonel West, please!' He gasped for air, breath steaming round his puffy face. He had two lines of glistening snot on his pale top lip, just like a toddler. 'I can go no further! Tell them . . . tell them to stop, for pity's sake!'

West cursed under his breath. The Northmen were annoyed enough as it was, and making less and less effort to disguise the fact, but, like it or not, Ladisla was still his commander. Not to mention the heir to the throne. West

could hardly order him to get up. 'Threetrees!' he wheezed.

The old warrior frowned over his shoulder. 'You better not be asking me to stop, lad.'

'We have to.'

'By the dead! Again? You Southerners got no bones in you at all! No wonder Bethod gave you such a kicking. If you bastards don't learn to march he'll be giving you another, I can tell you that!'

'Please. Just for a moment.'

Threetrees glared down at the sprawling Prince and shook his head with disgust. 'Alright, then. You can sit a minute, if that'll get you moving the quicker, but don't get used to it, you hear? We've not covered half the ground we need to today, if we're to keep ahead of Bethod.' And he stalked off to shout at the Dogman.

West sank down onto his haunches, working his numb toes, cupping his icy hands and blowing into them. He wanted to sprawl out like Ladisla, but he knew from harsh experience that if he stopped moving, starting up again would be all the more painful. Pike and his daughter stood over them, scarcely even too far out of breath. It was harsh proof, if any were really needed, that working metal in a penal colony was better preparation for slogging across brutal country than a life of uninterrupted ease.

Ladisla seemed to guess what he was thinking. 'You've no idea how hard this is for me!' he blurted.

'No, of course!' snapped West, his patience worn down to a stub. 'You've got the extra weight of my coat to carry!'

The Prince blinked, then looked down at the wet ground, his jaw muscles working silently. 'You're right. I'm sorry. I realise I owe you my life, of course. Not used to this sort of thing, you see. Not used to it at all.' He plucked at the frayed and filthy lapels of the coat and gave a sorry chuckle. 'My mother always told me that a man should be well presented under all circumstances. I wonder what she'd make of this.' West noticed he didn't offer to give it back, though.

Ladisla hunched his shoulders. 'I suppose I must shoulder a portion of the blame for this whole business.' A portion? West would have liked to serve him a portion of his boot. 'I should have listened to you, Colonel. I knew it all along. Caution is the best policy in war, eh? That's always been my motto. Let that fool Smund talk me into rashness. He always was an idiot!'

'Lord Smund gave his life,' muttered West.

'Shame he didn't give it a day earlier, we might not be in this fix!' The Prince's lip quivered slightly. 'What do you think they'll say about this back home, eh, West? What do you think they'll say about me now?'

'I've no idea, your Highness.' It could hardly be any worse than what they said already. West tried to squash his anger and put himself in Ladisla's position. He was so utterly unprepared for the hardship of this march, so completely without resources, so entirely dependent on others for everything. A man who had never had to make a decision more important than which hat to wear, who now had to come to terms with his responsibility for thousands of deaths. Small wonder he had no idea how to go about it.

'If only they hadn't run.' Ladisla clenched his fist and thumped petulantly at

a tree root. 'Why didn't they stand and fight, the cowardly bastards? Why didn't they fight?'

West closed his eyes, did his best to ignore the cold, and the hunger, and the pain, and to push away the fury in his chest. This was always the way of it. Just when Ladisla was finally starting to arouse some sympathy, he would let fall some loathsome utterance which brought West's distaste for the man flooding back. 'I couldn't possibly say, your Highness,' he managed to squeeze through his gritted teeth.

'Right,' grumbled Threetrees, 'that's your lot! On your feet again, and no excuses!'

'Not up again already is it, Colonel?'

'I'm afraid so.'

The Prince sighed and dragged himself wincing to his feet. 'I've no notion of how they can keep this up, West.'

'One stride at a time, your Highness.'

'Of course,' muttered Ladisla, starting to stumble off through the trees after the two convicts. 'One stride at a time.'

West worked his aching ankles for a moment and then bent down to follow, when he felt a shadow fall across him. He looked up to see that Black Dow had stepped into his path, blocking the way with one heavy shoulder, his snarling face no more than a foot away. He nodded towards the Prince's slow moving back. 'You want me to kill him?' he growled in Northern.

'If you touch any one of them!' West had spat out the words before he had any idea of how to finish. 'I'll . . .'

'Yes?'

'I'll kill you.' What else could he say? He felt like a child making ludicrous threats in a schoolyard. An extremely cold and dangerous schoolyard, and to a boy twice his size.

But Dow only grinned. 'That's a big temper you got on you for a skinny man. A lot of killing we're talking about, all of a sudden. You sure you got the bones for it?'

West tried to look as big as he could, which wasn't easy standing down a slope and hunched over with exhaustion. You have to show no fear, if you're to calm a dangerous situation, however much you might be feeling. 'Why don't you try me?' His voice sounded pitifully weak, even in his own ear.

'I might do that.'

'Let me know when it's time. I'd hate to miss it.'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' whispered Dow, turning his head and spitting on the ground. 'You'll know it's time when you wake up with your throat cut.' And he sauntered off up the muddy slope, slow enough to show he wasn't scared. West wished that he could have said the same. His heart was pounding as he pushed on between the trees after the others. He trudged doggedly past Ladisla and caught up to Cathil, falling into step beside her.

'You alright?' he asked.

'I've been worse.' She looked him up and down. 'How about you?'

West suddenly realised what a state he must look. He had an old sack with holes cut in it for his arms pulled over his filthy uniform, his belt buckled tight over the top with the heavy sword pushed through it and knocking against his

leg. There was an itchy growth of half beard across his rattling jaw, and he guessed that his face must have been a mixture of angry pink and corpse grey. He wedged his hands under his armpits and gave a sad grin. 'Cold.'

'You look it. Should have kept your coat, maybe.'

He had to nod at that. He peered through the branches of the pines at Dow's back and cleared his throat. 'None of them have been . . . bothering you, have they?'

'Bothering me?'

'Well, you know,' he said awkwardly, 'a woman in amongst all these men, they're not used to it. The way that man Dow stares at you. I don't—'

'That's very noble of you, Colonel, but I wouldn't worry about them. I doubt they'll do anything more than stare, and I've dealt with worse than that.'

'Worse than him?'

'First camp I was in, the commandant took a liking to me. Still had the glow of a good free life on my skin, I suppose. He starved me to get what he wanted. Five days with no food.'

West winced. 'And that was long enough to make him give up?'

'They don't give up. Five days was all I could stand. You do what you have to.'

'You mean . . .'

'What you have to.' She shrugged. 'I'm not proud, but I'm not ashamed either. Pride and shame, neither one will feed you. The only thing I regret is those five days of hunger, five days when I could have eaten well. You do what you have to. I don't care who you are. Once you start starving . . .' She shrugged again.

'What about your father?'

'Pike?' She looked up at the burnt-faced convict ahead of them. 'He's a good man, but he's no relative of mine. I've no idea what became of my real family. Split up all over England probably, if they're still alive.'

'So he's—'

'Sometimes, if you pretend you're family, people act differently. We've helped each other out. If it wasn't for Pike, I suppose I'd still be hammering metal in the camp.'

'Instead of which you're enjoying this wonderful outing.'

'Huh. You make do with what you're given.' She put her head down and quickened her pace, stalking off through the trees.

West watched her go. She had some bones to her, the Northmen would have said. Ladisla could have learned a thing or two from her tight-lipped determination. West looked over his shoulder at the Prince, stumbling daintily through the mud with a petulant frown on his face. He blew out a smoky sigh. It seemed that it was far too late for Ladisla to learn anything.

A miserable meal of a chunk of old bread and a cup of cold stew. Threetrees wouldn't let them have a fire, for all of Ladisla's begging. Too much risk of being seen. So they sat and spoke quietly in the gathering gloom, a little way from the Northmen. Talking was good, if only to keep one's mind from the cold, and the aches, and the discomfort. If only to stop one's teeth from

chattering.

'You said you fought in Kanta, eh, Pike? In the war?'

'That's right. I was a Sergeant there.' Pike nodded slowly, his eyes glittering in the pink mess of his face. 'Hard to believe we were always too hot, eh?'

West gave a sad gurgle. The closest thing to a laugh that he could manage. 'Which was your unit?'

'I was in the first regiment of the King's Own cavalry, under Colonel Glokta.'

'But, that was my regiment!'

'I know.'

'I don't remember you.'

Pike's burns shifted in a way that West thought might have been a smile. 'I looked different, back then. I remember you, though. Lieutenant West. The men liked you. Good man to go to with a problem.'

West swallowed. He wasn't much for fixing problems now. Only for making them. 'So how did you end up in the camp?'

Pike and Cathil exchanged glances. 'In general, among the convicts, you don't ask.'

'Oh.' West looked down, rubbed his hands together. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you.'

'No offence.' Pike sniffed, and rubbed at the side of his melted nose. 'I made some mistakes. Let's leave it at that. You got a family waiting for you?'

West winced, folded his arms tight across his chest. 'I have a sister, back home in Adua. She's . . . complicated.' He thought it best to end there. 'You?'

'I had a wife. When I was sent here, she chose to stay behind. I used to hate her for it, but you know what? I can't say I wouldn't have done the same.'

Ladisla emerged from the trees, wiping his hands on the hem of West's coat. 'That's better! Must've been that damn meat this morning.' He sat down between West and Cathil and she scowled as if someone had dropped a shovelful of shit next to her. It was safe to say the two of them were not getting on. 'What were we speaking of?'

West winced. 'Pike was just mentioning his wife—'

'Oh? You know, of course, that I am engaged to be married, to the Princess Terez, daughter of Grand Duke Orso of Talins. She is a famous beauty . . .' Ladisla trailed off, frowning round at the shadowy trees, as if even he was dimly aware of how bizarre talk of such matters seemed in the wilds of Angland. 'Though I am beginning to suspect that she is less than entirely delighted with the match.'

'One can't imagine why,' murmured Cathil, at least the tenth jibe of the evening.

'I am the heir to the throne!' snapped the Prince, 'and will one day be your king! It would not hurt anyone for you to treat me with a measure of respect!'

She laughed in his face. 'I've no country and no king, and certainly no respect for you.'

Ladisla gasped with indignation. 'I will not be spoken to like—'

Black Dow loomed up over them from nowhere. 'Shut his fucking mouth!' he snarled in Northern, stabbing at the air with one thick finger. 'Bethod might have ears anywhere! Stop his tongue flapping or it's coming out!' and he melted away into the shadows.

'He would like us to be quiet, your Highness,' translated West in a whisper. The Prince swallowed. 'So I gather.' He and Cathil hunched their shoulders and glared at each other in silence.

West lay on his back on the hard ground, the canvas creaking just above his face, watching the snow fall gently down beyond the black lumps of his boots. Cathil was pressed up against him on one side, the Dogman on the other. The rest of the band were all around, squeezed in tight together under a great smelly blanket. All except for Dow, who was out there taking watch. Cold like this was an amazing thing for making people familiar with each other.

There was a rumbling snore coming from the far end of the group. Threetrees or Tul, probably. The Dogman tended to twitch a lot in his sleep, jolting and stretching and twittering meaningless sounds. Ladisla's breath wheezed out on the right, chesty sounding and weak. All sleeping, more or less, as soon as they put their heads down.

But West could not sleep. He was too busy thinking about all the hardships, and the defeats, and the terrible dangers they were in. And not only them. Marshal Burr might be out there in the forests of Angland somewhere, hurrying south to the rescue, not knowing that he was falling into a trap. Not knowing that Bethod was expecting him.

The situation was dire but, against all reason, West's heart felt light. The fact was, out here, things were simple. There were no daily battles to be fought, no prejudices to overcome, no need to think more than an hour ahead. He felt free for the first time in months.

He winced and stretched his aching legs, felt Cathil shift in her sleep beside him, her head falling against his shoulder, her cheek pressing into his dirty uniform. He could feel the warmth of her breath on his face, the warmth of her body through their clothes. A pleasant warmth. The effect was only slightly spoiled by the stink of sweat and wet earth, and the Dogman squeaking and muttering in his other ear. West closed his eyes, the faintest grin on his face. Perhaps things could still be put right. Perhaps he still had the chance to be a hero. If he could just get Ladisla back alive to Lord Marshal Burr.

The Rest is Wasted Breath

Ferro rode, and watched the land. Still they followed the dark water, still the wind blew cold through her clothes, still the looming sky was heavy with chaos, and yet the country was changing. Where it had been flat as a table, now it was full of rises and sudden, hidden troughs. Land that men could hide in, and she did not like that thought. Not that she was fearful, for Ferro Maljinn feared no man. But she had to look and listen all the more carefully, for signs that anyone had passed, for signs that anyone was waiting.

That was simple good sense.

The grass had changed as well. She had grown used to it all around, tall and waving in the wind, but here it was short, and dry, and withered pale like straw. It was getting shorter, too, as they went further. Today there were bald patches scattered round. Bare earth, where nothing grew. Empty earth, like the dust of the Badlands.

Dead earth.

And dead for no reason that she could see. She frowned out across the crinkled plain, out towards far distant hills, a faint and ragged line above the horizon. Nothing moved in all that vast space. Nothing but them and the impatient clouds. And one bird, hovering high, high up, almost still on the air, long feathers on its dark wing tips fluttering.

'First bird I seen in two days,' grunted Ninefingers, peering up at it suspiciously.

'Huh,' she grunted. 'The birds have more sense than us. What are we doing here?'

'Got nowhere better to be.'

Ferro had better places to be. Anywhere there were Gurkish to kill. 'Speak for yourself.'

'What? You got a crowd of friends back in the Badlands, all asking after you? Where did Ferro get to? The laughs all dried up since she went away.' And he snorted as if he had said something funny.

Ferro did not see what. 'We can't all be as well-loved as you, pink.' She gave a snort of her own. 'I'm sure they will have a feast ready for you when you get back to the North.'

'Oh, there'll be a feast alright. Just as soon as they've hung me.'

She thought about that, for a minute, looking sideways at him from the corners of her eyes. Looking without turning her head, so if he glanced over she could flick her eyes away and pretend she never was looking at all. She had to admit, now that she was getting used to him, the big pink was not so bad. They had fought together, more than once, and he had always done his share. They had agreed to bury each other, if need be, and she trusted him to do it. Strange-looking, strange-sounding, but she had yet to hear him say he would do a thing, and see him not do it, which made him one of the better

men she had known. Best not to tell him that, of course, or give away the slightest sign that she thought it.

That would be when he let her down.

'You got no one, then?' she asked.

'No one but enemies.'

'Why aren't you fighting them?'

'Fighting? It's got me everything I have.' And he held his big empty hands up to show her. 'Nothing but an evil reputation and an awful lot of men with a burning need to kill me. Fighting? Hah! The better you are at it, the worse off it leaves you. I've settled some scores, and that can feel grand, but the feeling don't last long. Vengeance won't keep you warm nights, and that's a fact. Overrated. Won't do on its own. You need something else.'

Ferro shook her head. 'You expect too much out of life, pink.'

He grinned. 'And here was me thinking you expect too little.'

'Expect nothing and you won't be disappointed.'

'Expect nothing and you'll get nothing.'

Ferro scowled at him. That was the thing about talk. Somehow it always took her where she did not want to go. Lack of practice, maybe. She jerked her reins, and nudged her horse off with her heels, away from Ninefingers and the others, out to the side, on her own.

Silence, then. Silence was dull, but it was honest.

She frowned across at Luthar, sitting up in the cart, and he grinned back like an idiot, as wide as he could with bandages over half his face. He seemed different somehow, and she did not like it. Last time she had changed his dressings he had thanked her, and that seemed odd. Ferro did not like thanks. They usually hid something. It niggled at her to have done something that deserved a thanking. Helping others led to friendships. Friendships led to disappointment, at best.

At worst, betrayal.

Luthar was saying something to Ninefingers now, talking up to him from down in the cart. The Northman tipped back his head and roared with stupid laughter, making his horse startle and nearly dump him to the ground. Bayaz swayed contentedly in his saddle, happy creases round the corners of his eyes as he watched Ninefingers fumble with his reins. Ferro scowled off across the plain.

She had much preferred it when no one had liked each other. That was comfortable, and familiar. That she understood. Trust, and comradeship, and good humour, these things were so far in the past for her that they were almost unknown.

And who likes the unknown?

Ferro had seen a lot of dead men. She had made more than her share. She had buried a good few with her own hands. Death was her trade and her pastime. But she had never seen near so many corpses all at once. The sickly grass was scattered with them. She slid down from her saddle and walked among the bodies. There was nothing to tell who fought who, or one side from the other.

The dead all look alike.

Especially once they have been picked over – their armour, and their weapons, and half their clothes taken. They lay heaped thick and tangled in one spot, in the long shadow of a broken pillar. An ancient-looking thing, split and shattered, crumbling stone sprouting with withered grass and spotted with lichen. A big black bird sat on top of it, wings folded, peering at Ferro with beady, unblinking eyes as she came close.

The corpse of a huge man was lying half-propped against the battered stone below, a broken staff still gripped in his lifeless hand, dark blood and dark dirt crusted under the nails. Most likely the staff had held a flag, Ferro thought. Soldiers seemed to care a great deal for flags. She had never understood that. You could not kill a man with one. You could not protect yourself with one. And yet men would die for flags.

‘Foolishness,’ she muttered, frowning up at the big bird on the pillar.

‘A massacre,’ said Ninefingers.

Bayaz grunted and rubbed his chin. ‘But of who, by whom?’

Ferro could see Luthar’s swollen face peering wide-eyed and worried over the side of the cart. Quai was just in front of him on the driver’s seat, the reins dangling loose in his hands, his face expressionless as he looked down at the corpses.

Ferro turned over one of the bodies and sniffed at it. Pale skin, dark lips, no smell yet. ‘It did not happen long ago. Two days, maybe?’

‘But no flies?’ Ninefingers frowned at the bodies. A few birds were perched on them, watching. ‘Just birds. And they’re not eating. Strange.’

‘Not really, friend!’ Ferro jerked her head up. A man was striding quickly towards them across the battlefield, a tall pink in a ragged coat, a gnarled length of wood in one hand. He had an unkempt head of greasy hair, a long, matted beard. His eyes bulged bright and wild in a face carved with deep lines. Ferro stared at him, not sure how he could have come so close without her noticing.

The birds rose up from the bodies at the sound of his voice, but they did not scatter from him. They flew towards him, some settling on his shoulders, some flapping about his head and round him in wide circles. Ferro reached for her bow, snatching at an arrow, but Bayaz held out his arm. ‘No.’

‘Do you see this?’ The tall pink pointed at the broken pillar, and the bird flapped from it and across onto his outstretched finger. ‘A hundred-mile column! One hundred miles to Aulcus!’ He dropped his arm and the bird hopped onto his shoulder, next to the others, and sat there, still and silent. ‘You stand on the very borders of the dead land! No animals come here that are not made to come!’

‘How now, brother?’ called Bayaz, and Ferro shoved her arrow unhappily away. Another Magus. She might have guessed. Whenever you put two of these old fools together there were sure to be a lot of lips flapping, a lot of words made.

And that meant a lot of lies.

‘The Great Bayaz!’ shouted the new arrival as he came closer. ‘The First of the Magi! I heard tell you were coming from the birds of the air, the fish of the water, the beasts of the earth, and now I see with my own eyes, and yet still I scarcely believe. Can it be? That those blessed feet should touch this bloody

ground?’

He planted his staff on the earth, and as he did the big black bird scrambled from his shoulder and grasped the tip with its claws, flapping its wings until it was settled. Ferro took a cautious step back, putting one hand on her knife. She did not intend to be shat on by one of those things.

‘Zacharus,’ said Bayaz, swinging down stiffly from his saddle, although it seemed to Ferro he said the name with little joy. ‘You look in good health, brother.’

‘I look tired. I look tired, and dirty, and mad, for that is what I am. You are difficult to find, Bayaz. I have been searching all across the plain and back.’

‘We have been keeping out of sight. Khalul’s allies are seeking for us also.’ Bayaz’ eyes twitched over the carnage. ‘Is this your work?’

‘That of my charge, young Goltus. He is fierce as a lion, I tell you, and makes as fine an Emperor as the great men of old! He has captured his greatest rival, his brother Scario, and has shown him mercy.’ Zacharus sniffed. ‘Not my advice, but the young will have their way. These were the last of Scario’s men. Those who would not surrender.’ He flapped a careless hand at the corpses, and the birds on his shoulders flapped with him.

‘Mercy only goes so far,’ observed Bayaz.

‘They would not run into the dead land, so here they made their stand, and here they died, in the shadow of the hundred-mile columns. Goltus took the standard of the Third Legion from them. The very standard that Stolicus himself rode into battle under. A relic of the Old Time! Just as you and I are, brother.’

Bayaz did not seem impressed. ‘A piece of old cloth. It did these fellows precious little good. Carrying a stretch of moth-food does not make a man Stolicus.’

‘Perhaps not. The thing is much faded, truth be told. Its jewels were all torn out and sold long ago to buy weapons.’

‘Jewels are a luxury in these days, but everyone needs weapons. Where is your young Emperor now?’

‘Already on his way back eastwards with no time even to burn the dead. He is heading for Darmium, to lay siege to the city and hang this madman Cabrian from the walls. Then perhaps we can have peace.’

Bayaz gave a joyless snort. ‘Do you even remember what it feels like, to have peace?’

‘You might be surprised at what I remember.’ And Zacharus’ bulging eyes stared down at Bayaz. ‘But how are matters in the wider world? How is Yulwei?’

‘Watching, as always.’

‘And what of our other brother, the shame of our family, the great Prophet Khalul?’

Bayaz’ face grew hard. ‘He grows in strength. He begins to move. He senses his moment has come.’

‘And you mean to stop him, of course?’

‘What else should I do?’

‘Hmmm. Khalul was in the South, when last I heard, yet you journey westward. Have you lost your way, brother? There is nothing out here but the

ruins of the past.'

'There is power in the past.'

'Power? Hah! You never change. Strange company, you ride with, Bayaz. Young Malacus Quai I know, of course. How goes it, teller of tales?' he called out to the apprentice. 'How goes it, talker? How does my brother treat you?'

Quai stayed hunched on his cart. 'Well enough.'

'Well enough? That's all? You have learned to stay silent, then, at least. How did you teach him that, Bayaz? That I never could make him learn.'

Bayaz frowned up at Quai. 'I hardly had to.'

'So. What did Juvens say? The best lessons one teaches oneself.' Zacharus turned his bulging eyes on Ferro, and the eyes of his birds turned with him, all as one. 'This is a strange one you have here.'

'She has the blood.'

'You still need one who can speak with the spirits.'

'He can.' Bayaz nodded his head at Ninefingers. The big pink had been fiddling with his saddle but now he looked up, bewildered.

'Him?' Zacharus frowned. Much anger, Ferro thought, but some sadness, and some fear. The birds on his shoulders, and his head, and the tip of his staff, stood tall and spread their wings, and flapped and squawked. 'Listen to me, brother, before it is too late. Give up this folly. I will stand with you against Khalul. I will stand with you and Yulwei. The three of us, together, as it was in the Old Time, as it was against the Maker. The Magi united. I will help you.'

There was a long silence, and hard lines spread out across Bayaz' face. 'You will help me? If only you had offered your help long ago, after the Maker fell, when I begged you for it. Then we might have torn up Khalul's madness before it put down roots. Now the whole South swarms with Eaters, making the world their playground, treating the solemn word of our master with open scorn! The three of us will not be enough, I think. What then? Will you lure Cawneil from her books? Will you find Leru, under whatever stone she has crawled beneath in all the wide Circle of the World? Will you bring Karnault back from across the wide ocean, or Anselmi and Brokentoath from the land of the dead? The Magi united, is it?' And Bayaz' lip curled into a sneer. 'That time is done, brother. That ship sailed, long ago, never to return, and we were not on it!'

'I see!' hissed Zacharus, red-streaked eyes bulging wider than ever. 'And if you find what you seek, what then? Do you truly suppose that you can control it? Do you dare to imagine that you can do what Glustrod, and Kanedias, and Juvens himself could not?'

'I am the wiser for their mistakes.'

'I hardly think so! You would punish one crime with a worse!'

Bayaz' thin lips and hollow cheeks turned sharper still. No sadness, no fear, but much anger of his own. 'This war was not of my making, *brother!* Did I break the Second Law? Did I make slaves of half the South for the sake of my vanity?'

'No, but we each had our part in it, and you more than most.'

Strange, how I remember things that you leave out. How you squabbled with Khalul. How Juvens determined to separate you. How you sought out the

Maker, persuaded him to share his secrets.' Zacharus laughed, a harsh cackle, and his birds croaked and squawked along with him. 'I daresay he never intended to share his daughter with you, eh, Bayaz? The Maker's daughter? Tolomei? Is there room in your memory for her?'

Bayaz' eyes glittered cold. 'Perhaps the blame is mine,' he whispered. 'The solution shall be mine also—'

'Do you think Euz spoke the First Law on a whim? Do you think Juvens put this thing at the edge of the World because it was *safe*? It is . . . it is evil!'

'Evil?' Bayaz snorted his contempt. 'A word for children. A word the ignorant use for those who disagree with them. I thought we grew out of such notions long centuries ago.'

'But the risks—'

'I am resolved.' And Bayaz' voice was iron, and well sharpened. 'I have thought for long years upon it. You have said your piece, Zacharus, but you have offered me no other choices. Try and stop me, if you must. Otherwise, stand aside.'

'Then nothing has changed.' The old man turned to look at Ferro, his creased face twitching, and the dark eyes of his birds looked with him. 'And what of you, devil-blood? Do you know what he would have you touch? Do you understand what he would have you carry? Do you have an inkling of the dangers?' A small bird hopped from his shoulder and started twittering round and round Ferro's head in circles. 'You would be better to run, and never to stop running! You all would!'

Ferro's lip curled. She slapped the bird out of the air, and it clattered to the ground, hopping and tweeting away between the corpses. The others squawked and hissed and clucked their anger, but she ignored them. 'You do not know me, old fool pink with a dirty beard. Do not pretend to understand me, or to know what I know, or what I have been offered. Why should I prefer the word of one old liar over another? Take your birds and keep your nose to your own business, then we will have no quarrel. The rest is wasted breath.'

Zacharus and his birds blinked. He frowned, opened his mouth, then shut it silently again as Ferro swung herself up into her saddle and jerked her horse round towards the west. She heard the sounds of the others following, hooves thumping, Quai cracking the reins of the cart, then Bayaz' voice. 'Listen to the birds of the air, the fish of the water, the beasts of the earth. Soon you will hear that Khalul has been finished, his Eaters turned to dust, the mistakes of the past buried, as they should have been, long ago.'

'I hope so, but I fear the news will be worse.' Ferro looked over her shoulder, and saw the two old men exchanging one more stare. 'The mistakes of the past are not so easily buried. I earnestly hope that you fail.'

'Look around you, old friend.' And the First of the Magi smiled as he clambered up into his saddle. 'None of your hopes ever come to anything.'

And so they rode away from the corpses in silence, past the broken hundred-mile column and into the dead land. Towards the ruins of the past. Towards Aulcus.

Under a darkening sky.

A Matter of Time

To Arch Lector Sult, head of his Majesty's Inquisition.

Your Eminence,

Six weeks now, we have held the Gurmish back. Each morning they brave our murderous fire to tip earth and stone into our ditch, each night we lower men from the walls to try and dig it out. In spite of all our efforts, they have finally succeeded in filling the channel in two places. Daily, now, scaling parties rush forward from the Gurmish lines and set their ladders, sometimes making it onto the walls themselves, only to be bloodily repulsed.

Meanwhile the bombardment by catapults continues, and several sections of the walls are dangerously weakened. They have been shored up, but it might not be long before the Gurmish have a practicable breach. Barricades have been raised on the inside to contain them should they make it through into the Lower City. Our defences are tested to the limit, but no man entertains a thought of surrender. We will fight on.

As always, your Eminence, I serve and obey.

Sand dan Glokta

Superior of Dagoska.

Glokta held his breath, licking at his gums as he watched the dust clouds settling across the roofs of the slums through his eye-glass. The last crashes and clatters of falling stones faded, and Dagoska, for that one moment, was strangely silent. *The world holds its breath.*

Then the distant screaming reached him on his balcony, thrust out from the wall of the Citadel, high above the city. A screaming he remembered well from battlefields both old and new. *And hardly happy memories. The Gurmish war cry. The enemy are coming.* Now, he knew, they were charging across the open ground before the walls, as they had done so many times these past weeks. *But this time they have a breach.*

He watched the tiny shapes of soldiers moving on the dust-coated walls and towers to either side of the gap. He moved his eye-glass down to take in the wide half-circle of barricades, the triple ranks of men squatting behind them, waiting for the Gurmish to come. Glokta frowned and worked his numb left foot inside his boot. *A meagre-seeming defence, indeed. But all we have.*

Now Gurmish soldiers began to pour through the yawning breach like black ants swarming from a nest; a crowd of jostling men, twinkling steel, waving banners, emerging from the clouds of brown dust, scrambling down the great heap of fallen masonry and straight into a furious hail of flatbow bolts. *First through the breach. An unenviable position.* The front ranks were mown down as they came on, tiny shapes falling and tumbling down the hill of rubble behind the walls. Many fell, but there were always more, pressing in over the bodies of their comrades, struggling forward over the mass of broken stones and shattered timbers, and into the city.

Now another cry floated up, and Glokta saw the defenders charge from behind their barricades. Union soldiers, mercenaries, Dagoskans, all hurled themselves towards the breach. At this distance it all seemed to move with absurd slowness. *A stream of oil and a stream of water dribbling towards one another.* They met, and it became impossible to tell one side from the other. A

flowing mass, punctuated by glittering metal, rippling and surging like the sea, a colourful flag or two hanging limp above.

The cries and screams hung over the city, echoing, shifting with the breeze. The far off swell of pain and fury, the clatter and din of combat. Sometimes it sounded like a distant storm, incomprehensible. Sometimes a single cry or word would float to Glokta's ear with surprising clarity. It reminded him of the sound of the crowd at the Contest. *Except the blades are not blunted now. Both sides are in deadly earnest. How many already dead this morning, I wonder?* He turned to General Vissbruck, sweating beside him in his immaculate uniform.

'Have you ever fought in a *melée* like that, General? A straight fight, toe to toe, at push of pike, as they say?'

Vissbruck did not pause for a moment from squinting eagerly through his own eye-glass. 'No. I have not.'

'I wouldn't recommend it. I have only done it once and I am not keen to repeat the experience.' He shifted the handle of his cane in his sweaty palm. *Not that that's terribly likely now, of course.* 'I fought on horseback often enough. Charged small bodies of infantry, broke and pursued them. A noble business, cutting men down as they run, I earned all kinds of praise for it. I soon discovered a battle on foot is a different matter. The crush is so tight you can hardly take a breath, let alone perform acts of heroism. The heroes are the ones lucky enough to live through it.' He snorted with joyless laughter. 'I remember being pushed up against a Gurmish officer, as close to each other as lovers, neither one of us able to strike, or do anything but snarl at each other. Spear-points digging everywhere, at random. Men pushed onto the weapons of their own side, or crushed underfoot. More killed by mishap than design.' *The whole business is one giant mishap.*

'An ugly affair,' muttered Vissbruck, 'but it has to be done.'

'So it does. So it does.' Glokta could see a Gurmish standard waving around above the boiling throng, silk flapping, tattered and stained. Stones flung from the broken walls above began to crash down amongst them. Men pressed in helpless, shoulder to shoulder, unable to move. A great vat of boiling water was upended into their midst from high above. The Gurmish had lost all semblance of order as they came through the breach, and now the formless mass of men began to waver. The defenders pressed in on them from all sides, relentless, shoving with pike and shield, hacking with sword and axe, trampling the fallen under their boots.

'We're driving them back!' came Vissbruck's voice.

'Yes,' muttered Glokta, peering through his eye-glass at the desperate fighting. 'So it would seem.' *And my joy is limitless.*

The Gurmish assault had been surrounded and men were falling fast, stumbling back up the hill of rubble towards the breach. Gradually the survivors were driven out and down into the no-man's-land behind, flatbows on the walls firing into the mass of men as they fled, spreading panic and murder. The vague sound of the defenders cheering filtered up to them on the walls of the citadel.

One more assault defeated. Scores of Gurmish killed, but there are always more. If they break through the barricades, and into the Lower City, we are finished. They

can keep coming as often as they like. We need only lose once, and the game is done.

'It would seem the day is ours. This one, at least.' Glokta limped to the corner of the balcony and peered southwards through his eye-glass, down into the bay and the Southern Sea beyond. There was nothing but calm water, glittering bright to the flat horizon. 'And still no sign of any Gurkish ships.'

Vissbruck cleared his throat. 'With the greatest of respect . . .' *Meaning none, I suppose.* 'The Gurkish have never been sailors. Is there any reason to suppose that they have ships now?'

Only that an old black wizard appeared in my chambers in the dead of night, and told me to watch out for some. 'Simply because we fail to see a thing, it does not mean it is not there. The Emperor has us on the rack as it is. Perhaps he keeps his fleet in reserve, waiting for a better time, refusing to show his whole hand until he needs to.'

'But with ships, he could blockade us, starve us out, get around our defences! He need not have squandered all those soldiers—'

'If the Emperor of Gurkhul has one thing in abundance, General, it is more soldiers. They have made a workable breach.' Glokta scanned along the walls until he came to the other weak spot. He could see the great cracks in the masonry on the inside, shored up with heavy beams, with heaped-up rubble, but still bowing inwards, more each day. 'And they will soon have another. They have filled the ditch in four places. Meanwhile our numbers dwindle, our morale falters. They don't need ships.'

'But we have them.' Glokta was surprised to find the General had stepped up close beside him and was speaking softly and urgently, looking earnestly into his eyes. *Like a man proposing marriage. Or treason. I wonder which we have here?* 'There is still time,' muttered Vissbruck, his eyes swivelling nervously towards the door and back. 'We control the bay. As long as we still hold the Lower City we hold the wharves. We can pull out the Union forces. The civilians at least. There are still some wives and children of officers left in the Citadel, a scattering of merchants and craftsmen who settled in the Upper City and are reluctant to leave. It could be done swiftly.'

Glokta frowned. *True, perhaps, but the Arch Lector's orders were otherwise. The civilians can make their own arrangements, if they so desire. The Union troops will not be going anywhere. Except onto their funeral pyres, of course.* But Vissbruck took his silence for encouragement. 'If you were to give me the word it could be done this very evening, and all away before—'

'And what will become of us all, General, when we step down onto Union soil? A tearful reunion with our masters in the Agriant? Some of us would soon be crying, I do not doubt. Or should we take the ships and sail to far-off Suljuk, do you suppose, to live long lives of ease and plenty?' Glokta slowly shook his head. 'It is a charming fantasy, but that's all it is. Our orders are to hold the city. There can be no surrender. No backing down. No sailing home.'

'No sailing home,' echoed Vissbruck sourly. 'Meanwhile the Gurkish press in closer every day, our losses mount, and the lowest beggar in the city can see that we cannot hold the land walls for much longer. My men are close to mutiny, and the mercenaries are considerably less dependable. What would you have me tell them? That the Closed Council's orders do not include

retreat?’

‘Tell them that reinforcements will be here any day.’

‘I’ve been telling them that for weeks!’

‘Then a few more days should make no difference.’

Vissbruck blinked. ‘And might I ask when reinforcements will arrive?’

‘Any.’ Glokta narrowed his eyes. ‘Day. Until then we hold.’

‘But why?’ Vissbruck’s voice had gone high as a girl’s. ‘What for? The task is impossible! The waste! Why, damn it?’

Why. Always why. I grow bored of asking it. ‘If you think I know the Arch Lector’s mind you’re an even bigger idiot than I supposed.’ Glokta sucked slowly at his gums, thinking. ‘You are right about one thing, however. The land walls may fall at any moment. We must prepare to withdraw into the Upper City.’

‘But . . . if we abandon the Lower City we abandon the docks! There can be no supplies brought in! No reinforcements, even if they do arrive! What of your fine speech to me, Superior? The walls of the Upper City are too long and too weak? If the land walls fall the city is doomed? We must defeat them there or not at all, you told me! If the docks are lost . . . there can be no escape!’ *My dear, plump, pudding of a General, do you not see it? Escape has never been an option.*

Glokta grinned, showing Vissbruck the empty holes in his teeth. ‘If one plan fails, we must try another. The situation, as you have so cleverly pointed out, is desperate. Believe me, I would prefer it if the Emperor simply gave up and went home, but I hardly think we can count on that, do you? Send word to Cosca and Kahdia, all civilians should be moved out of the Lower City tonight. We may need to pull back at a moment’s notice.’ *At least I won’t have to limp so far to reach the front lines.*

‘The Upper City will scarcely hold so many! They will be lining the streets!’ *Better than lining a grave pit.* ‘They will be sleeping in the squares and the hallways!’ *Preferable to sleeping in the ground.* ‘There are thousands of them down there!’

‘Then the sooner you start the better.’

Glokta half ducked back as he stepped through the doorway. The heat beyond was almost unbearable, the reek of sweat and burnt flesh tickled unpleasantly at his throat.

He wiped his eyes, already running with tears, on the back of his trembling hand and squinted into the darkness. The three Practicals took shape in the gloom. They were gathered round, masked faces lit from underneath by the angry orange of the brazier, all hard bright bone and hard dark shadow. *Devils, in hell.*

Vitari’s shirt was soaked right through and stuck to her shoulders, furious creases cut into her face. Severard was stripped to the waist, gasping breath muffled through his mask, lank hair flapping with sweat. Frost was as wet as if he had stood out in the rain, fat drops running down his pale skin, jaw muscles locked and bulging. The only one in the room who showed no sign of discomfort was Shickel. The girl had an ecstatic smile across her face as Vitari

ground the sizzling iron into her chest. *Just as if it were the happiest moment of her life.*

Glokta swallowed as he watched, remembering being shown the brand himself. Remembering pleading, begging, blubbing for mercy. Remembering the feeling of the metal pressed into his skin. *So searing hot it feels almost cold.* The mindless din of his own screams. The stink of his own flesh burning. He could smell it now. *First you suffer it yourself, then you inflict it on others, then you order it done. Such is the pattern of life.* He shrugged his aching shoulders and hobbled forwards into the room. 'Progress?' he croaked.

Severard straightened up, grunting and arching his back, wiped his forehead and flicked sweat onto the slimy floor. 'I don't know about her, but I'm more than halfway to breaking.'

'We're getting nowhere!' snapped Vitari, tossing the black iron back in the brazier and sending up a shower of sparks. 'We tried blades, we tried hammers, we tried water, we tried fire. She won't say a word. Fucking bitch is made of stone.'

'Softer than stone,' hissed Severard, 'but she's nothing like us.' He took a knife from the table, the blade briefly flashing orange in the darkness, leaned forward and carved a long gash into Shickel's thin forearm. Her face barely even twitched while he did it. The wound hung open, glistening angry red. Severard dug his finger into it and twisted it round. Shickel showed not the slightest sign of being in pain. He pulled his finger out and held it up, rubbed the tip against his thumb. 'Not even wet. It's like cutting into a week-old corpse.'

Glokta felt his leg trembling, and he winced and slid into the spare seat. 'Plainly, this is not normal.'

'Unnerthatement,' grunted Frost.

'But she's not healing the way she was.' None of the cuts in her skin were closing. *All hanging open, dead and dry as meat in a butcher's shop.* Nor were the burns fading. *Charred black stripes across her skin, like meat fresh from the grill.*

'Just sits there, watching,' said Severard, 'and not a word.'

Glokta frowned. *Can this really be what I had in mind when I joined the Inquisition? The torture of young girls?* He wiped the wet from under his stinging eyes. *But then, this is both much more and much less than a girl.* He remembered the hands clutching at him, the three Practicals straining to pull her back. *Much more and much less than human. We must not make the same mistakes we made with the First of the Magi.*

'We must keep an open mind,' he murmured.

'Do you know what my father would say to that?' The voice croaked out, deep and grinding raw, like an old man's, oddly wrong from that young, smooth face.

Glokta felt his left eye twitching, the sweat trickling under his coat. 'Your father?'

Shickel smiled at him, eyes glinting in the darkness. It almost seemed as if the cuts in her flesh smiled with her. 'My father. The Prophet. Great Khalul. He would say that an open mind is like to an open wound. Vulnerable to poison. Liable to fester. Apt to give its owner only pain.'

'Now you want to talk?'

'Now I choose to.'

'Why?'

'Why not? Now that you know it is my choice, and not yours. Ask your questions, cripple. You should take your chances to learn when you can. God knows you could do with them. A man lost in the desert—'

'I know the rest.' Glokta paused. *So many questions, but what to ask one such as this?* 'You are an Eater?'

'We have other names for ourselves, but yes.' She inclined her head gently, her eyes never leaving his. 'The priests made me eat my mother first. When they found me. It was that or die, and the need to live was so very great, before. I wept afterwards, but that was long ago and there are no tears left in me. I disgust myself, of course. Sometimes I need to kill, sometimes I wish to die. I deserve to. Of that I have no doubts. My only certainty.'

I should have known better than to expect straight answers. One almost feels nostalgic for the Mercers. Their crimes, at least, I could understand. Still, any answers are better than none. 'Why do you eat?'

'Because the bird eats the worm. Because the spider eats the fly. Because Khalul desires it and we are the Prophet's children. Juvens was betrayed, and Khalul swore vengeance, but he stood alone against many. So he made his great sacrifice, and broke the Second Law, and the righteous joined with him, more and more with the passing years. Some joined him willingly. Some not. But none have denied him. My siblings are many, now, and each of us must make our sacrifice.'

Glokta gestured at the brazier. 'You feel no pain?'

'I do not, but plentiful remorse.'

'Strange. It's the other way around for me.'

'You, I think, are the lucky one.'

He snorted. 'Easy to say until you find you can't piss without wanting to scream.'

'I hardly remember what pain feels like, now. All that was long ago. The gifts are different for each of us. Strength, and speed, and endurance beyond the limits of the human. Some of us can take forms, or trick the eye, or even use the Art, the way that Juvens taught his apprentices. The gifts are different for each of us, but the curse is the same.' She stared at Glokta, head cocked over to one side.

Let me guess. 'You can't stop eating.'

'Not ever. And that is why the Gurmish appetite for slaves is never-ending. There is no resisting the Prophet. I know. Great Father Khalul.' And her eyes rolled up reverently towards the ceiling. 'Arch Priest of the Temple of Sarkant. Holiest of all whose feet touch the earth. Humbler of the proud, righter of wrongs, teller of truths. Light shines from him as it shines from the stars. When he speaks it is with the voice of God. When he—'

'No doubt he shits golden turds as well. You believe all that rubbish?'

'What does it matter what I believe? I don't make the choices. When your master gives you a task, you do your best at it. Even if the task is a dark one.'

That much I can understand. 'Some of us are only suited to dark tasks. Once you've chosen your master—'

Shickel croaked dry laughter across the table. 'Few indeed are those who get

a choice. We do as we are told. We stand or fall beside those who were born near to us, who look as we do, who speak the same words, and all the while we know as little of the reasons why as does the dust we return to.' Her head sagged sideways and a gash in her shoulder opened up as wide as a mouth. 'Do you think I like what I have become? Do you think I do not dream of being as others are? But once the change has come, you can never go back. Do you understand?'

Oh, yes. Few better. 'Why were you sent here?'

'The work of the righteous is never-ending. I came to see Dagoska returned to the fold. To see its people worship God according to the Prophet's teachings. To see my brothers and sisters fed.'

'It seems you failed.'

'Others will follow. There is no resisting the Prophet. You are doomed.'

That much I know. Let us try another tack. 'What do you know . . . about Bayaz.'

'Ah, Bayaz. He was the Prophet's brother. He is the start of this, and will be the end.' Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'Liar and traitor. He killed his master. He murdered Juvens.'

Glokta frowned. 'That is not the way I heard the story.'

'Everyone has their own way of telling every story, broken man. Have you not learned that yet?' Her lip curled. 'You have no understanding of the war you fight in, of the weapons and the casualties, of the victories and the defeats, every day. You do not guess at the sides, or the causes, or the reasons. The battlefields are everywhere. I pity you. You are a dog, trying to understand the argument of scholars, and hearing nothing but barking. The righteous are coming. Khalul will sweep the earth clean of lies and build a new order. Juvens will be avenged. It is foretold. It is ordained. It is promised.'

'I doubt you'll see it.'

She grinned at him. 'I doubt you will either. My father would rather have taken this city without a fight, but if he must fight for it then he will, and with no mercy, and with the fury of God behind him. That is the first step on the path he has chosen. On the path he has chosen for all of us.'

'What step comes next?'

'Do you think my masters tell me their plans? Do yours? I am a worm. I am nothing. And yet I am more than you are.'

'What comes next?' hissed Glokta. Nothing but silence.

'Answer him!' hissed Vitari. Frost hauled an iron from the brazier, the tip glowing orange, and ground it into Shickel's bare shoulder. Foul-smelling steam hissed up, fat spat and sizzled, but the girl said nothing. Her lazy eyes watched her own flesh burn, without emotion. *There will be no answers here.*

Only more questions. Always more questions.

'I've had enough,' snarled Glokta as he seized hold of his cane and struggled up, squirming in a painful and futile effort to make his shirt come unstuck from his back.

Vitari gestured at Shickel, her gleaming eyes still fixed on Glokta under their drooping lids, a faint smile still clinging to her lips. 'What should we do with this?'

An expendable agent of an uncaring master, sent unwilling to a faraway place, to

fight, and kill, for reasons she hardly understands. Sound familiar? Glokta grimaced as he turned his aching back on the stinking chamber.

'Burn it,' he said.

Glokta stood on his balcony in the sharp evening, frowning down towards the Lower City.

It was windy up here on the rock, a cold wind off the dark sea, whipping at Glokta's face, at his fingers on the dry parapet, slapping the tails of his coat against his legs. *The closest thing we'll get to winter in this cursed crucible.* The flames of the torches by the door flapped and flickered in their iron cages, two lights in the gathering darkness. There were more lights out there, many more. Lamps burned on the rigging of the Union ships in the harbour, their reflections flashing and breaking in the water below. Lights glowed in the windows of the dark palaces under the citadel, in the tops of the lofty spires of the Great Temple. Down in the slums, thousands of torches burned. Rivers of tiny points of light, flowing out of the buildings, onto the roads, towards the gates of the Upper City. *Refugees leaving their homes, such as they are. Heading for safety, such as it is. How long can we keep them safe, I wonder, once the land walls fall?* He knew the answer already. *Not long.*

'Superior!'

'Why, Master Cosca. I'm so glad you could join me.'

'Of course! There's nothing like a stroll in the evening air after a skirmish.' The mercenary strutted over. Even in the gloom, Glokta could see the difference in him. He walked with a spring in his step, a glint in his eye, his hair neatly brushed, his moustache waxed stiff. *An inch or two taller and a good ten years younger, all of a sudden.* He pranced to the parapet, closed his eyes and sucked a deep breath through his sharp nose.

'You look remarkably well for someone who has just fought in a battle.'

The Styrian grinned at him. 'I wasn't so much in the battle as just behind it. I've always felt the very front is a poor place to fight from. No one can hear you with all the clatter. That, and the chances of being killed there are really very high.'

'Doubtless. How did it go for us?'

'The Gurkish are still outside, so I'd say, as far as battles go, it went well. I doubt the dead would agree with me, but who cares a shit for their opinion?' He scratched happily at his neck. 'We did well today. But tomorrow, and the day after, who can say? Still no chance of reinforcement?' Glokta shook his head and the Styrian took in a sharp breath. 'It's all the same to me, of course, but you may want to consider a withdrawal while we still hold the bay.'

Everyone would like to withdraw. Even me. Glokta snorted. 'The Closed Council hold my leash, and they say no. The King's honour will not permit it, they inform me, and apparently his honour is more valuable than our lives.'

Cosca raised his brows. 'Honour, eh? What the hell is that anyway? Every man thinks it's something different. You can't drink it. You can't fuck it. The more of it you have the less good it does you, and if you've got none at all you don't miss it.' He shook his head. 'But some men think it's the best thing in the world.'

'Uh,' muttered Glokta, licking at his empty gums. *Honour is worth less than one's legs, or one's teeth. A lesson I paid dearly for.* He peered towards the shadowy outline of the land walls, studded with burning bonfires. The vague sounds of fighting could still be heard, the odd flaming arrow soared high into the air and fell in the ruined slums. *Even now, the bloody business continues.* He took a deep breath. 'What are our chances of holding out for another week?'

'Another week?' Cosca pursed his lips. 'Reasonable.'

'Two weeks?'

'Two?' Cosca clicked his tongue. 'Less good.'

'Which would make a month a hopeless cause.'

'Hopeless would be the word.'

'You seem almost to revel in the situation.'

'Me? I've made a speciality from hopeless causes.' He grinned at Glokta. 'These days, they're the only ones that will have me.'

I know the feeling. 'Hold the land walls as long as you can, then pull back. The walls of the Upper City must be our next line of defence.'

Cosca's grin could just be seen shining in the darkness. 'Hold as long as we can, and then pull back! I can hardly wait!'

'And perhaps we should prepare some surprises for our Gurmish guests when they finally make it past the walls. You know,' and Glokta waved his hand absently, 'tripwires and hidden pits, spikes daubed with excrement and so on. You've some experience in that type of warfare, I daresay.'

'I am experienced in all types of warfare.' Cosca snapped his heels together and gave an elaborate salute. 'Spikes and excrement! There's honour for you.'

This is war. The only honour is in winning. 'Talking of honour, you'd best let our friend General Vissbruck know where your surprises are. It would be a shame if he were to impale himself by accident.'

'Of course, Superior. A dreadful shame.'

Glokta felt his hand bunching into a fist on the parapet. 'We must make the Gurmish pay for every stride of ground.' *We must make them pay for my ruined leg. For every inch of dirt. For my missing teeth.* 'For every meagre shack, and crumbling hut, and worthless stretch of dust.' *For my weeping eye, and my twisted back, and my repulsive shadow of a life.* He licked at his empty gums. 'Make them pay.'

'Excellent! The only good Gurmish are the dead ones!' The mercenary spun and marched through the door into the Citadel, his spurs jingling, leaving Glokta alone on the flat roof.

One week? Yes. Two weeks? Perhaps. Any longer? Hopeless. There may have been no ships, but that old riddler Yulwei was still right. And so was Eider. There never was any chance. For all our efforts, for all our sacrifices, Dagoska must surely fall. It is only a matter of time, now.

He stared out across the darkened city. It was hard to separate the land from the sea in the blackness, the lights on the boats from the lights in the buildings, the torches on the rigging from the torches in the slums. All was a confusion of points of light, flowing around each other, disembodied in the void. There was only one certainty in all of it.

We're finished. Not tonight, but soon. We are surrounded, and the net will only draw tighter. It is a matter of time.

Scars

One by one, Ferro took out the stitches – slitting the thread neatly with the shining point of her knife, working them gently out of Luthar’s skin, dark fingertips moving quick and sure, yellow eyes narrowed with concentration. Logen watched her work, shaking his head slowly at the skill of it. He’d seen it done often, but never so well. Luthar barely even looked in pain, and he always looked in pain lately.

‘Do we need another bandage on it?’

‘No. We let it breathe.’ The last stitch slid out, and Ferro tossed the bloody bits of thread away and rocked back on her knees to look at the results.

‘That’s good,’ said Logen, voice hushed. He’d never guessed that it could come out half so well. Luthar’s jaw looked slightly bent in the firelight, like he was biting down on one side. There was a ragged notch out of his lip, and a forked scar torn from it down to the point of his chin, pink dots on either side where the stitches had been, the skin around it stretched and twisted. Nothing more, but for some swelling that’d soon go down. ‘That’s some damn good stitching. I never saw any better. Where d’you learn healing?’

‘A man called Aruf taught me.’

‘Well he taught you well. Rare skill to have. Happy chance for us that he did it.’

‘I had to fuck him first.’

‘Ah.’ That did shine a bit of a different light on it.

Ferro shrugged. ‘I didn’t mind. He was a good man, more or less, and he taught me how to kill, into the bargain. I’ve fucked a lot of worse men for a lot less.’ She frowned at Luthar’s jaw, pressing it with her thumbs, testing the flesh round the wound. ‘A lot less.’

‘Right,’ muttered Logen. He exchanged a worried glance with Luthar. This conversation hadn’t gone at all the way he’d imagined. Maybe he should’ve expected that with Ferro. He spent half the time trying to prise a word out of her, then when she did give him something, he didn’t have a clue where to go with it.

‘It’s set,’ she grunted, after probing Luthar’s face for a moment in silence.

‘Thank you.’ He grabbed hold of her hand as she moved back. ‘Truly. I don’t know what I’d have—’

She grimaced as if he’d slapped her and snatched her fingers away. ‘Fine! But if you get your face smashed again you can stitch it yourself.’ And she got up and stalked off, sat down in the shifting shadows in the corner of the ruin, as far away from the others as she could get without going outside. She seemed to like thanks even less than she liked any other kind of talk, but Luthar was too pleased to finally have the dressings off to worry much about it.

‘How does it look?’ he asked, peering down cross-eyed at his own chin,

wincing and prodding at it with one finger.

‘It’s good,’ said Logen. ‘You’re lucky. You might not be quite so pretty as you were, but you’re still a damn sight better-looking than me.’

‘Of course,’ he said, licking at the notch in his lip, half-smiling. ‘It isn’t as though they cut my head right off.’

Logen grinned as he knelt down beside the pot and gave it a stir. He was getting on alright with Luthar now. It was a harsh lesson, but a broken face had done that boy a power of good. It had taught him some respect, and a lot quicker than any amount of talk. It had taught him to be realistic, and that had to be a good thing. Small gestures and time. Rarely failed to win folk over. Then he caught sight of Ferro, frowning at him from the shadows, and he felt his grin sag. Some folk take longer than others, and a few never really get there. Black Dow had been like that. Made to walk alone, Logen’s father would have said.

He looked back to the pot, but there wasn’t much encouragement in it. Just porridge with some shreds of bacon and some chopped-up roots. There was nothing to hunt out here. Dead land meant what it said. The grass on the plain had dwindled to brown tufts and grey dust. He looked round the ruined shell of the house they’d pitched camp in. Firelight flickered on broken stone, crumbled render, ancient splintered wood. No ferns rooted in the cracks, no saplings in the earth floor, not even a shred of moss between the stones. Seemed to Logen as if no one but them had trodden there in centuries. Maybe they hadn’t.

Quiet too. Not much wind tonight. Only the soft crackling of the fire, and Bayaz’ voice mumbling away, lecturing his apprentice about something or other. Logen was good and glad the First of the Magi was awake again, even if he did look older and seem grimmer than ever. At least now Logen didn’t have to decide what to do. That had never worked out too well for anyone concerned.

‘A clear night at last!’ sang Brother Longfoot as he ducked under the lintel, pointing upwards with huge smugness. ‘A perfect sky for Navigation! The stars shine clearly for the first time in ten days and, I do declare, we are not a stride out from our chosen course! Not a foot! I have not led us wrong, my friends. No! That would not have been my way at all! Forty miles to Aulcus, as I reckon it, just as I told you!’ No congratulations were forthcoming. Bayaz and Quai were deep in their ill-tempered muttering. Luthar was holding up the blade of his short sword and trying to find an angle where he could see his reflection. Ferro was frowning in her corner. Longfoot sighed and squatted down beside the fire. ‘Porridge again?’ he muttered, peering into the pot and wrinkling up his nose.

‘Afraid so.’

‘Ah, well. The tribulations of the road, eh, my friend? There would be no glory in travel without the hardship.’

‘Uh,’ said Logen. He could have managed with a lot less glory if it meant a decent dinner. He prodded unhappily at the bubbling mush with a spoon.

Longfoot leaned over to mutter under his breath. ‘It would seem our illustrious employer is having some further troubles with his apprentice.’ Bayaz’ lecture was growing steadily louder and more bad-tempered.

‘ . . . being handy with a pan is all very well, but the practice of magic is still your first vocation. There has been a distinct change in your attitude of late. A certain watchfulness and disobedience. I am beginning to suspect that you may prove a disappointing pupil.’

‘And were you always a fine pupil?’ There was a trace of a mocking smile on Quai’s face. ‘Was your own master never disappointed?’

‘He was, and the consequences were dire. We all make mistakes. It is a master’s place to try to stop his students making the same ones.’

‘Then perhaps you should tell me the history of your mistakes. I might learn to be a better student.’

Master and apprentice glared at each other over the fire. Logen did not like the look of Bayaz’ frown. He had seen such looks before on the First of the Magi, and the outcome had never been good. He couldn’t understand why Quai had shifted from abject obedience to sullen opposition in the space of a few weeks, but it wasn’t making anyone’s life easier. Logen pretended to be fascinated by the porridge, half-expecting to be suddenly deafened by the roar of searing flame. But when sound came it was only Bayaz’ voice, and speaking softly.

‘Very well, Master Quai, there is some sense in your request, for once. Let us talk of my mistakes. An expansive subject indeed. Where to start?’

‘At the beginning?’ ventured his apprentice. ‘Where else should a man ever start?’

The Magus gave a sour grunt. ‘Huh. Long ago, then, in the Old Time.’ He paused for a moment and stared into the flames, the light shifting over his hollow face. ‘I was Juvens’ first apprentice. But soon after starting my education, my master took a second. A boy from the South. His name was Khalul.’ Ferro looked up suddenly, frowning from the shadows. ‘From the beginning, the two of us could never agree. We both were far too proud, and jealous of each other’s talents, and envious of any mark of favour the other earned from our master. Our rivalry persisted, even as the years passed and Juvens took more apprentices, twelve in all. In the beginning, it drove us to be better pupils: more diligent, more devoted. But after the horror of the war with Glustrod, many things were changed.’

Logen gathered up the bowls and started spooning steaming slop out into them, making sure to keep one ear on Bayaz’ talk. ‘Our rivalry became a feud, and our feud became a hatred. We fought, with words, then with hands, then with magic. Perhaps, left to ourselves, we would have killed each other. Perhaps the world would be a happier place if we had, but Juvens interposed. He sent me to the far north, and Khalul to the south, to two of the great libraries he had built long years before. He sent us there to study, separately and alone, until our tempers cooled. He thought the high mountains, and the wide sea, and the whole breadth of the Circle of the World would put an end to our feud, but he misjudged us. Rather we each raged in our exile, and blamed the other for it, and plotted our petty revenges.’

Logen shared out the food, such as it was, while Bayaz glared at Quai from under his heavy brows. ‘If I had only had the good sense to listen to my master then, but I was young, and head-strong, and full of pride. I burned to make myself more powerful than Khalul. I decided, fool that I was, that if Juvens

would not teach me . . . I had to find another master.'

'Slop again, eh, pink?' grunted Ferro as she pulled her bowl from Logen's hand.

'No need to thank me.' He tossed her a spoon and she snatched it out of the air. Logen handed the First of the Magi his bowl. 'Another master? What other master could you find?'

'Only one,' murmured Bayaz. 'Kanedias. The Master Maker.' He turned his spoon over and over thoughtfully in his hand. 'I went to his House, and I knelt before him, and I begged to learn at his feet. He refused me, of course, as he refused everyone . . . at first. But I was stubborn, and in time he relented, and agreed to teach me.'

'And so you lived in the House of the Maker,' murmured Quai. Logen shivered as he hunched down over his own bowl. His one brief visit to the place still gave him nightmares.

'I did,' said Bayaz, 'and I learned its ways. My skill in High Art made me useful to my new master. But Kanedias was far more jealous of his secrets than ever Juvens had been, and he worked me as hard as a slave at his forges, and taught me only such scraps as I needed to serve him. I grew bitter, and when the Maker left to seek out materials for his works, my curiosity, and my ambition, and my thirst for knowledge, drove me to stray into parts of his House where he had forbidden me to tread. And there I found his best-guarded secret.' He paused.

'What was it?' prompted Longfoot, spoon frozen halfway to his mouth.

'His daughter.'

'Tolomei,' whispered Quai, in a hiss barely audible.

Bayaz nodded, and one corner of his mouth curled upwards, as though he remembered something good. 'She was unlike any other. She had never left the Maker's House, had never spoken to anyone besides her father. She helped him with certain tasks, I learned. She handled . . . certain materials . . . that only the Maker's own blood could touch. That, I believe, is why he fathered her in the first place. She was beautiful beyond compare.' Bayaz' face twitched, and he looked down at the ground with a sour smile. 'Or so she seems to me, in memory.'

'That was good,' said Luthar, licking his fingers and setting down his empty bowl. He'd become a great deal less picky with his food lately. Logen reckoned a few weeks of not being able to chew was sure to do that to a man. 'There any more?' he asked hopefully.

'Take mine,' hissed Quai, thrusting his bowl at Luthar. His face was deathly cold, his eyes two points of light in the shadows as he glared across at his master. 'Go on.'

Bayaz looked up. 'Tolomei fascinated me, and I her. It seems strange to say, but I was young then, and full of fire, and still had as fine a head of hair as Captain Luthar.' He ran one hissing palm over his bald scalp, then shrugged his shoulders. 'We fell in love.' He looked at each of them in turn, as though daring them to laugh, but Logen was too busy sucking salty porridge from his teeth, and no one else so much as smiled.

'She told me of the tasks her father gave her, and I began, dimly, to understand. He had gathered from far and wide some fragments of material

from the world below, left over from the time when demons still walked our earth. He was trying to tap the power of these splinters, to incorporate them into his machines. He was tampering with those forces forbidden by the First Law, and had already had some success.' Logen shifted uncomfortably. He remembered the thing he had seen in the Maker's House, lying in the wet on a block of white stone, strange and fascinating. The Divider, Bayaz had called it. Two edges – one here, one on the Other Side. He had no appetite now, and he shoved his bowl down by the fire, half-finished.

'I was horrified,' continued Bayaz. 'I had seen the ruin that Glustrod had brought upon the world, and I resolved to go to Juvens and tell him everything. But I feared to leave Tolomei behind, and she would not leave all she knew. So I delayed, and Kanedias returned unexpected, and found us together. His fury was . . .' and Bayaz winced as though the memory alone was painful ' . . . impossible to describe. His House shook with it, rang with it, burned with it. I was lucky to escape with my life, and fled to seek sanctuary with my old master.'

Ferro snorted. 'He was the forgiving type, then?'

'Fortunately for me. Juvens would not turn me away, despite my betrayal. Especially once I told him of his brother's attempts to break the First Law. The Maker came in great wrath, demanding justice for the violation of his daughter, the theft of his secrets. Juvens refused. He demanded to know what experiments Kanedias had been undertaking. The brothers fought, and I fled. The sky was lit with the fury of their battle. I returned to find my master dead, his brother gone. I swore vengeance. I gathered the Magi from across the world, and we made war on the Maker. All of us. Except for Khalul.'

'Why not him?' growled Ferro.

'He said that I could not be trusted. That my folly had caused the war.'

'All too true, surely?' muttered Quai.

'Perhaps, in part. But he made far worse accusations also. He and his cursed apprentice, Mamun. Lies,' he hissed at the fire. 'All lies, and the rest of the Magi were not deceived. So Khalul left the order, and returned to the South, and sought for power elsewhere. And he found it. By doing as Glustrod had done, and damning himself. By breaking the Second Law, and eating the flesh of men. Only eleven of us went to fight Kanedias, and only nine of us returned.'

Bayaz took a long breath, and gave a long sigh. 'So, Master Quai. There is the story of my mistakes, laid bare. You could say they were the cause of my master's death, of the schism in the order of Magi. You could say that is why we are now heading westwards, into the ruins of the past. You could say that is why Captain Luthar has suffered a broken jaw.'

'The seeds of the past bear fruit in the present,' muttered Logen to himself.

'So they do,' said Bayaz, 'so they do. And sour fruit indeed. Will you learn from my mistakes, Master Quai, as I have, and pay some attention to your master?'

'Of course,' said the apprentice, though Logen wondered if there was a hint of irony in his voice. 'I will obey in all things.'

'You would be wise to. If I had obeyed Juvens, perhaps I would not have this.' Bayaz undid the top two buttons of his shirt and pulled his collar to one

side. The firelight flickered on a faded scar, from the base of the old man's neck down towards his shoulder. 'The Maker himself gave it to me. Another inch and it would have been my death.' He rubbed sourly at it. 'All those years ago, and it still aches, from time to time. The pain it has given me over the slow years . . . so you see, Master Luthar, although you bear a mark, it could be worse.'

Longfoot cleared his throat. 'That is quite an injury, of course, but I believe I can do better.' He took hold of his dirty trouser leg and pulled it right up to his groin, turning his sinewy thigh towards the firelight. There was an ugly mass of puckered grey scar flesh almost all the way round his leg. Even Logen had to admit to being impressed.

'What the hell did that?' asked Luthar, looking slightly queasy.

Longfoot smiled. 'Many years ago, when I was yet a young man, I was shipwrecked in a storm off the coast of Suljuk. Nine times, in all, God has seen fit to dump me into his cold ocean in bad weather. Luckily, I have always been truly blessed as a swimmer. Unluckily, on this occasion, some manner of great fish took me for its next meal.'

'A fish?' muttered Ferro.

'Indeed. A most huge and aggressive fish, with a jaw wide as a doorway and teeth like knives. Fortunately, a sharp blow on the nose,' and he chopped at the air with his hand, 'caused it to release me, and a fortuitous current washed me up on shore. I was doubly blessed to find a sympathetic lady among the natives, who allowed me to recuperate in her abode, for the people of Suljuk are generally most suspicious of outsiders.' He sighed happily. 'That is how I came to learn their language. A highly spiritual people. God has favoured me. Truly.' There was a silence.

'I bet you can do better.' Luthar was grinning across at Logen.

'I got bitten by a mean sheep once, but it didn't leave much of a mark.'

'What about the finger?'

'This?' He stared at the familiar stub, wagging it back and forward. 'What about it?'

'How did you lose it?'

Logen frowned. He wasn't sure he liked the way this conversation was going. Hearing about Bayaz' mistakes was one thing, but he wasn't that keen to delve into his own. The dead knew, he'd made some bad ones. Still, they were all looking now. He had to say something. 'I lost it in a battle. Outside a place called Carleon. I was young back then, and full of fire myself. It was my stupid fashion to go charging into the thick of the fighting. That time, when I came out, the finger was gone.'

'Heat of the moment, eh?' asked Bayaz.

'Something like that.' He frowned and rubbed gently at the stump. 'Strange thing. For a long time after it was gone, I could still feel it, itching, right in the tip. Drove me mad. How can you scratch a finger that's not there?'

'Did it hurt?' asked Luthar.

'Like a bastard, to begin with, but not half as much as some others I've had.'

'Like what?'

That needed some thinking about. Logen scratched at his face and turned over all the hours, and days, and weeks he'd spent injured, and bloody, and

screaming. Limping around or trying to cut his meat with his hands all bandaged up. 'I got a good sword cut across my face one time,' he said, feeling the notch Tul Duru had made in his ear, 'bled like anything. Nearly got my eye poked out with an arrow,' rubbing at the crescent scar under his brow. 'Took hours to dig out all the splinters. Then I had a bloody great rock dropped on me at the siege of Uffrith. First day, as well.' He rubbed the back of his head and felt the lumpy ridges, under his hair. 'Broke my skull, and my shoulder too.'

'Nasty,' said Bayaz.

'My own fault. That's what you get when you try and tear a city wall down with your bare hands.' Luthar stared at him, and he shrugged. 'Didn't work. Like I said, I was hot-headed in my youth.'

'I'm only surprised you didn't try and chew through it.'

'Most likely that would've been my next move. Just as well they dropped a rock on me. At least I've still got my teeth. Spent two months squealing on my back while they laid siege to the city. I only just healed in time for the fight with Threetrees, when I got the whole lot broken again, and more besides.' Logen winced at the memory, curling up the fingers of his right hand and straightening them out, remembering the pain of it, all smashed up. 'Now that really did hurt. Not as much as this, though,' and he dug his hand under his belt and pulled his shirt up. They all peered across the fire to see what he was pointing at. A small scar, really, just under his bottom rib, in the hollow beside his stomach.

'Doesn't look like much,' said Luthar.

Logen shuffled round to show them his back. 'There's the rest of it,' he said, jerking his thumb at what he knew was a much bigger mark beside his backbone. There was a long silence while they took that in.

'Right through?' murmured Longfoot.

'Right through, with a spear. In a duel, with a man called Harding Grim. Damn lucky to live, and that's a fact.'

'If it was in a duel,' murmured Bayaz, 'how did you come out alive?'

Logen licked his lips. His mouth tasted bitter. 'I beat him.'

'With a spear through you?'

'I didn't know about it until afterwards.'

Longfoot and Luthar frowned at each other. 'That would seem a difficult detail to overlook,' said the Navigator.

'You'd think so.' Logen hesitated, trying to think of a good way to put it, but there was no good way. 'There are times . . . well . . . I don't really know what I'm doing.'

A long pause. 'How do you mean?' asked Bayaz, and Logen winced. All the fragile trust he'd built over the last few weeks was in danger of crumbling round his ears, but he didn't see any choice. He'd never been much of a liar.

'When I was fourteen, I think, I argued with a friend. Can't even remember what about. I remember being angry. I remember he hit me. Then I was looking at my hands.' And he looked down at them now, pale in the darkness. 'I'd strangled him. Good and dead. I didn't remember doing it, but there was only me there, and I had his blood under my nails. I dragged him up some rocks, and I threw him off onto his head, and I said he fell out of a tree and

died, and everyone believed me. His mother cried, and so on, but what could I do? That was the first time it happened.'

Logen felt the eyes of the group all fixed on him. 'Few years later I nearly killed my father. Stabbed him while we were eating. Don't know why. Don't know why at all. He healed, luckily.'

He felt Longfoot easing nervously away, and he hardly blamed him. 'That was when the Shanka started coming more often. So my father sent me south, over the mountains, to look for help. So I found Bethod, and he offered me help if I'd fight for him. I was happy to do it, fool that I was, but the fighting went on, and on. The things I did in those wars . . . the things they told me I did.' He took a long breath. 'Well. I'd killed friends. You should have seen what I did to enemies. To begin with I enjoyed it. I loved to sit at the top of the fire, to look at men and see their fear, to have no man dare to meet my eye, but it got worse. And worse. There came one winter that I didn't know who I was, or what I was doing most of the time. Sometimes I'd see it happening, but I couldn't change it. No one knew who I'd kill next. They were all shitting themselves, even Bethod, and no one more scared of me than I was.'

They all sat for a while in gaping silence. The ruined building had been seeming like some kind of comfort after all that dead and empty space on the plain, but it didn't any more. The empty windows yawned like wounds. The empty doorways gaped like graves. The silence dragged on, and on, and then Longfoot cleared his throat. 'So, for the sake of argument, do you think it's possible that, perhaps without intending to, you might kill one of us?'

'It's more likely I'd kill all of you than one.'

Bayaz was frowning. 'Forgive me if I feel less than entirely reassured.'

'I wish at least that you had mentioned this earlier!' snapped Longfoot. 'It is the type of information a travelling companion should share! I hardly think that—'

'Leave him be,' growled Ferro.

'But we need to know—'

'Shut your mouth, stargazing fool. You're all a long way from perfect.' She scowled over at Longfoot. 'Some of you make a lot of words and are nowhere near when the trouble starts.' She frowned at Luthar. 'Some of you are a lot less use than you think you are.' She glared at Bayaz. 'And some of you keep a lot of secrets, then fall asleep at bad times and leave the rest of us stranded in the middle of nowhere. So he's a killer. So fucking what? Suited you well enough when the killing needed doing.'

'I only wanted to—'

'Shut your mouth, I said.' Longfoot blinked for a moment, then did as he was told.

Logen stared across the fire at Ferro. The very last place he'd ever have hoped to get a good word. Out of all of them, only she'd seen it happen. Only she knew what he really meant. And still she'd spoken up for him. She saw him looking, and she scowled and shrank back into her corner, but that didn't change anything. He felt himself smile.

'What about you, then?' Bayaz was looking at Ferro as well, touching one finger to his lip as though thinking.

‘What about me?’

‘You say you don’t like secrets. We have all spoken of our scars. I bored the group with my old stories, and the Bloody-Nine thrilled us with his.’ The Magus tapped his bony face, full of hard shadows from the fire. ‘How did you get yours?’

A pause. ‘I bet you made whoever gave you that suffer, eh?’ said Luthar, a trace of laughter in his voice.

Longfoot started to chuckle. ‘Oh indeed! I daresay he came to a sharp end! I dread to think of the—’

‘I did it,’ said Ferro.

Such laughter as there was sputtered and died, the smiles faded as they took that in. ‘Eh?’ said Logen.

‘What, pink, you fucking deaf? I did it to myself.’

‘Why?’

‘Hah!’ she barked, glaring at him across the fire. ‘You don’t know what it is, to be owned! When I was twelve years old I was sold to a man called Susman.’ And she spat on the ground and snarled something in her own tongue. Logen didn’t reckon it was a compliment. ‘He owned a place where girls were trained, then sold on at a profit.’

‘Trained to do what?’ asked Luthar.

‘What do you think, fool? To fuck.’

‘Ah,’ he squeaked, swallowing and looking at the ground again.

‘Two years I was there. Two years, before I stole a knife. I did not know then, how to kill. So I hurt my owner the best way I could. I cut myself, right to the bone. By the time they got the blade away from me I had cut my price down to a quarter.’ She grinned fiercely at the fire as if it had been her proudest day. ‘You should have heard him squeal, the bastard!’

Logen stared. Longfoot gaped. Even the First of the Magi looked shocked. ‘You scarred yourself?’

‘What of it?’ Silence again. The wind blew up and swirled around inside the ruin, hissing in the chinks between the stones and making the flames flicker and dance. No one had much left to say after that.

Furious

The snow drifted down, white specks swirling in the empty air beyond the cliff's edge, turning the green pines, the black rocks, the brown river below into grey ghosts. West could hardly believe that as a child he had looked forward to the coming of snow every year. That he had been delighted to wake up and see the world coated in white. That it could have held a mystery, and a wonder, and a joy. Now the sight of the flakes settling on Cathil's hair, on Ladisla's coat, on West's own filthy trouser leg, filled him with horror. More gripping cold, more chafing wet, more crushing effort to move. He rubbed his pale hands together, sniffed and frowned up at the sky, willing himself not to slide into misery.

'Have to make the best of things,' he whispered, the words croaking in his raw throat and smoking thick in the cold. 'Have to.' He thought of warm summer in the Agriont. Blossom blowing from the trees in the squares. Birds twittering on the shoulders of smiling statues. Sunlight pouring through leafy branches in the park. It did not help. He sniffed back runny snot, tried yet again to worm his hands up into his uniform sleeves, but they were never quite long enough. He gripped the frayed hems with his pale fingers. Would he ever be warm again?

He felt Pike's hand on his shoulder. 'Something's up,' murmured the convict. He pointed at the Northmen, squatting in a group, muttering urgently to each other.

West stared wearily over at them. He had only just got nearly comfortable and it was difficult to take an interest in anything beyond his own pain. He slowly unfolded his aching legs, heard his cold knees click as he got up, shook himself, tried to slap the tiredness out of his body. He started shuffling towards the Northmen, bent over like an old man, arms wrapped round himself for warmth. Before he got there the meeting had already broken up. Another decision made without any need for his opinion.

Threetrees strode towards him, utterly unaffected by the falling snow. 'The Dogman's spotted some of Bethod's scouts,' he grunted, pointing through the trees. 'Just down the rise there, right in by the stream, near those falls. Lucky he caught them. They could just as easily have caught us, and we'd most likely all be dead by now.'

'How many?'

'A dozen, he thinks. Getting round 'em could be risky.'

West frowned, rocking his weight from one foot back to the other, trying to keep the blood moving. 'Surely fighting them would be riskier still?'

'Maybe, maybe not. If we can get the jump on 'em, our chances ain't bad. They've got food, weapons,' he looked West up and down, 'and clothes. All kinds o' gear that we could use. We're just past the knuckle o' winter now. We keep heading north, it ain't going to get any warmer. It's decided. We're

fighting. A dozen's long odds, so we'll need every man. Your mate Pike there looks like he can swing an axe without worrying too much on the results. You'd best get him ready an' all.' He nodded at Ladisla, hunched up on the ground. 'The girl should stay out but—'

'Not the Prince. It's too dangerous.'

Threetrees narrowed his eyes. 'You're damn right it's dangerous. That's why every man should share the risk.'

West leaned in close, doing his best to sound persuasive with his cracked lips as tough and thick as a pair of overcooked sausages. 'He'd only make the risk greater for everyone. We both know it.' The Prince peered back at them suspiciously, trying to guess what they were talking about. 'He'd be about as much use in a fight as a sack over your head.'

The old Northman snorted. 'Most likely you're right there.' He took a deep breath and frowned, taking some time to think about it. 'Alright. It ain't usual, but alright. He stays, him and the girl. The rest of us fight, and that means you too.'

West nodded. Each man has to do his part, how ever little he might relish the prospect. 'Fair enough. The rest of us fight.' And he stumbled back over to tell the others.

Back home in the bright gardens of the Agriont, Crown Prince Ladisla would never have been recognised. The dandies, the courtiers, the hangers-on who usually clung to his every word would most likely have stepped over him, holding their noses. The coat West had given him was coming apart at the seams, worn through at the elbows, crusted with mud. Beneath it, his spotless white uniform had gradually darkened to the colour of filth. A few tatters of gold braid still hung from it, like a glorious bouquet of flowers rotted down to the greasy stalks. His hair was a tangled thatch, he had developed a patchy growth of ginger beard, and a rash of hair between his brows implied that in happier days he had spent a great deal of time plucking them. The only man within a hundred miles in a sorrier condition was probably West himself.

'What's to do?' mumbled the Prince as West dropped down beside him.

'There are some of Bethod's scouts down near the river, your Highness. We have to fight.'

The Prince nodded. 'I will need a weapon of some—'

'I must ask you to stay behind.'

'Colonel West, I feel that I should be—'

'You would be a great asset, your Highness, but I am afraid it is quite out of the question. You are the heir to the throne. We cannot afford to put you in harm's way.'

Ladisla did his best to look disappointed, but West could almost taste his relief. 'Very well, if you're sure.'

'Absolutely.' West looked at Cathil. 'The two of you should stay here. We'll be back soon. With luck.' He almost winced at the last part. Luck had been decidedly thin on the ground lately. 'Keep out of sight, and keep quiet.'

She grinned back at him. 'Don't worry. I'll make sure he doesn't hurt himself.'

Ladisla glowered sideways, fists clenched with impotent anger. It seemed he was getting no better at dealing with her constant jibes. No doubt being

flattered and obeyed your entire life was poor preparation for being made a fool of in awful conditions. West wondered for a moment if he was making a mistake leaving them alone, but it was hardly as though he had any choice. They were well out of the way up here. They should be safe. A lot safer than him, anyway.

They squatted down on their haunches. A ring of scarred and dirty faces, hard expressions, ragged hair. Threetrees, his craggy features creased with deep lines. Black Dow with his missing ear and his savage grin. Tul Duru, his heavy brows drawn in. Grim, looking as careless as a stone. The Dogman, bright eyes narrowed, breath steaming from his sharp nose. Pike, with a deep frown across those few parts of his burned face that were capable of movement. Six of the hardest-looking men in the world, and West.

He swallowed. Every man has to do his part.

Threetrees was scratching a crude map in the hard soil with a stick. 'Alright, lads, they're tucked in down here near the river, a dozen, maybe more. Here's how we'll get it done. Grim, up on the left, Dogman on the right, usual drill.'

'Done, chief,' said the Dogman. Grim nodded.

'Me, Tul, and Pike'll come at 'em from this side, hand to hand. Hope to surprise 'em. Don't shoot any of us, eh, lads?'

The Dogman grinned. 'If you keep well clear of the arrows, you'll be fine.'

'I'll keep that in mind. Dow and West, you'll get across the river and wait by the falls there. Come up behind them.' The stick scratched a hard groove into the earth, and West felt the lump of worry swelling in his throat. 'Noise of the water should keep you out of notice. Go when you see me chuck a stone over into the pool, you hear me? The stone coming over. That's the signal.'

'Course it is, chief,' grunted Dow.

West suddenly realised that Threetrees was glaring right at him. 'You hearing this, boy?'

'Er, yes, of course,' he muttered, tongue clumsy with cold and growing fear. 'When the stone comes over, we go . . . chief.'

'Alright. And the lot of you keep your eyes open. There could be others near. Bethod's got scouts all over the country. Anyone still guessing at what to do?' They all shook their heads. 'Good. Then don't go blaming me if you get yourself killed.'

Threetrees stood up and the others followed him. They made their last few preparations, loosening blades in sheaths, pulling at bowstrings, tightening buckles. There wasn't much for West to prepare. A heavy, stolen sword pushed through a weathered belt, and that was it. He felt an utter fool in amongst this company. He wondered how many people they had killed between them. He would not have been surprised if it had been a whole town full, with enough left over for an outlying village or two. Even Pike looked more than ready to commit careless murder. West had to remind himself that he had not the slightest idea why the man had been convicted to a penal colony in the first place. Looking at him now, running a thoughtful thumb down the edge of his heavy axe, eyes hard in that dead, burned face, it was not difficult to imagine.

West stared at his hands. They were trembling, and not just from the cold. He grabbed one with the other and squeezed them tight. He looked up to see the Dogman grinning at him. 'Got to have fear to have courage,' he said, then

turned and followed Threetrees and the others into the trees.

Black Dow's harsh voice hacked at West from behind. 'You're with me, killer. Try and keep up.' He spat on the frozen ground then turned and set off towards the river. West took one last look back towards the others. Cathil nodded to him, once, and he nodded back, then he turned and followed Dow, ducking through the trees in silence, all coated with glittering, dripping ice, while the hissing of the waterfall grew louder and louder in his ears.

Threetrees' plan was starting to seem rather short on details. 'Once we get across the stream, and we get the signal, what do we do?'

'Kill,' grunted Dow over his shoulder.

That answer, useless though it was, sent a sudden stab of panic through West's guts. 'Should I go left or right?'

'Whichever you like, long as you stay out of my way.'

'Where will you be going?'

'Wherever the killing is.'

West wished he had never spoken as he stepped gingerly out onto the bank. He could see the falls just upstream, a wall of dark rock and rushing white water between the black tree trunks, throwing freezing mist and noise into the air.

The river here was no more than four strides across but the water flooded past, quick and dark, frothing round the wet stones at its edges. Dow held his sword and axe up high, waded out steadily, up to his waist in the middle, then crept up onto the far bank, pressing himself dripping against the rocks. He looked round, frowned to see West so far behind, jerked his hand angrily for him to follow.

West fumbled out his own sword and lifted it up, held a deep breath and stepped into the stream. The water flooded into his boot and round his calf. It felt as if his leg had been suddenly clamped in ice. He took a step forward and his other leg vanished up to the thigh. His eyes bulged, his breath came in snorts, but there could be no turning back. He took one more step. His boot slipped on the mossy stones on the bed of the stream and he slid helplessly in up to his armpits. He would have screamed if the freezing water had not hammered the air out of his lungs. He floundered forward, half-stumbling, half-swimming, teeth gritted with panic, sloshed up onto the far bank, breath hissing in shallow, desperate gasps. He staggered up and leaned against the stones behind Dow, his skin numb and prickling.

The Northman smirked at him. 'You look cold, boy.'

'I'm fine,' spluttered West through chattering teeth. He had never been so cold in his life. 'I'll do my puh . . . puh . . . part.'

'You'll do your what? I'll not have you fighting cold boy, you'll get us both killed.'

'Don't worry about—' Dow's open hand slapped him hard across the face. The shock of it was almost worse than the pain. West gawped, dropping his blade in the mud, one hand jerking up instinctively to his stinging cheek. 'What the—'

'Use it!' hissed the Northman at him. 'It belongs to you!'

West was just opening his mouth when Dow's other hand smacked into it and sent him staggering against the rocks, blood dribbling from his lip and

onto the wet earth, his head singing.

‘It’s yours. Own it!’

‘You fucking . . .’ The rest was nothing more than a mindless growl as West’s hands closed round Dow’s neck, squeezing, clawing, snarling like an animal, teeth bared and mindless. The blood surged round his body, the hunger, and the pain, and the frustration of the endless freezing march spilling out of him all at once.

But Black Dow was twice as strong as West, however angry he was. ‘Use it!’ he growled as he peeled West’s hands away and crushed him back against the rocks. ‘You hot yet?’

Something flashed overhead and splashed into the water beside them. Dow gave him a parting shove then sprang away, charging up the bank with a roar. West struggled after him, clawing the heavy sword up out of the mud and lifting it high, the blood pulsing in his head, howling meaningless sounds at the top of his lungs.

The muddy ground sped by underneath him. He crashed through bushes and rotten wood into the open. He saw Dow hack a gawping Northman down with his axe. Dark blood leapt into the air, black spots against the tangle of branches and white sky. Trees and rocks and shaggy men jolted and wobbled, his own breath roaring in his ears like a storm. Someone loomed up and he swung the sword at them, felt it bite. Blood splattered into West’s face and he reeled, and spat, and blinked, slid onto his side and scrambled up. His head was full of wailing and crying, clashing metal and cracking bone.

Chop. Hack. Snarl.

Someone staggered near him, clutching at an arrow in his chest. West’s sword split his skull open down to his mouth. The corpse jerked, twisting the blade from his hand. He stumbled in the dirt, half fell, lashed out at a passing body with his fist. Something crashed into him and flung him back against a tree, knocking the air from his lungs in a breathy wheeze. Someone had him fast around the chest, pinning his arms, trying to crush the life out of him.

West craned forward, and sank his teeth into the man’s lip, felt them meet in the middle. He screamed and punched but West hardly felt the blows. He spat out the flap of flesh and butted him in the face. The man squirmed and yelped, blood leaking out of his torn mouth. West clamped his teeth round his nose, growling like a mad dog.

Bite. Bite. Bite.

His mouth filled with blood. He could hear screaming in his ears, but all that mattered was to squeeze his jaws together, tighter and tighter. He twisted his head away and the man reeled back, clutching at his face. An arrow came out of nowhere and thudded into his ribs, he fell to his knees. West dived on him, grabbed hold of his tangled hair with clutching hands and smashed his face into the ground, again and again.

‘It’s done.’

West’s hands jerked back, grasping claws full of blood and ripped-out hair. He struggled up, gasping, eyes bulging.

Everything was still. The world had stopped reeling. Spots of snow filtered gently down into the clearing, settling across the wet earth, the scattered gear, the stretched-out bodies, and the men still standing. Tul was not far away,

staring at him. Threetrees was behind, sword in hand. Pike's pink slab of a face had something close to a wince on it, one bloody fist squeezed round his arm. They were all looking. All looking at him. Dow raised his hand, pointing at West. He tipped his head back and started to laugh. 'You bit him! You bit his fucking nose off! I knew you were a mad bastard!'

West stared at them. The thumping in his head was starting to subside. 'What?' he muttered. There was blood all over him. He wiped his mouth. Salty. He looked at the nearest corpse, face down on the earth. Blood was trickling from underneath its head, running down the slope and pooling around West's boot. He remembered . . . something. A sudden cramp in his guts bent him over, spitting pink onto the ground, empty stomach heaving.

'Furious!' shouted Dow. 'That's what y'are!'

Grim had already stepped out of the bushes, bow over his shoulder, and was squatting down, dragging a bloody fur from one of the corpses. 'Good coat,' he muttered to himself.

West watched them all pick over the campsite, bent over and sick and utterly spent. He listened to Dow laughing. 'Furious!' cackled his harsh voice. 'That's what I'll call you!'

'They got arrows over here.' The Dogman pulled something out of one of the packs on the ground, and grinned. 'And cheese. Bit dusty.' He picked some mould off the wedge of yellow with his dirty fingers, bit into it, and grinned. 'Still good though.'

'Lots o' good stuff,' nodded Threetrees, starting to smile himself. 'And we're all still going, more or less. Good day's work, lads.' He slapped Tul on the back. 'We'd best head on north quick before these lot are missed. Let's get what there is fast and pick up those other two.'

West's mind was only just starting to move again. 'The others!'

'Alright,' said Threetrees, 'you and Dow check on them . . . Furious.' He turned away with half a smile.

West lurched off through the trees the way he'd come, slipping and sliding in his haste, blood pulsing again. 'Protect the Prince,' he muttered to himself. He waded across the stream almost without noticing the cold, struggled onto the far bank and back uphill, hurrying towards the cliff where they had left the others.

He heard a woman's scream, quickly cut off, a man's voice growling. Horror crept through every part of his body. Bethod's men had found them. It might already be too late. He urged his burning legs on up the slope, stumbling and sliding in the mud. Had to protect the Prince. The air burned in his throat but he forced himself on, fingers clutching at the tree trunks, scrabbling at the loose twigs and needles on the frosty ground.

He burst out into the open space beside the cliff, breathing hard, the bloody sword gripped tight in his fist.

Two figures struggled on the ground. Cathil was underneath, wriggling on her back, kicking and clawing at someone on top of her. The man had managed to drag her trousers down below her knees and now he was fiddling with his own belt while he struggled to hold his other hand across her mouth. West took a step forward, raising the sword high, and the man's head snapped round. West blinked. The would-be rapist was none other than Crown Prince

Ladislá himself.

When he saw West he stumbled up and took a step back. He had a slightly sheepish expression, almost a grin, like a schoolboy caught stealing a pie from the kitchen. 'Sorry,' he said, 'I thought you'd be longer.'

West stared at him, hardly able to understand what was happening. 'Longer?'

'You fucking bastard!' screamed Cathil, scrambling back and dragging her trousers up. 'I'll fucking kill you!'

Ladislá touched his lip. 'She bit me! Look!' He held his bloody finger tips out as though they were proof of an outrage perpetrated against him. West found himself moving forwards. The Prince must have seen something in his face, because he took a step away, holding up one hand while he held up his trousers with the other. 'Now hold on, West, just—'

There was no towering rage. No temporary blindness, no limbs moving by themselves, not the slightest trace of a headache. There was no anger at all. West had never in his life felt so calm, so sober, so sure of himself. He chose to do it.

His right arm jerked out and his open palm thumped against Ladislá's chest. The Crown Prince gave a gentle gasp as he stumbled sharply backwards. His left foot twisted in the mud. He put down his right foot, but there was no ground behind him. His brows went up, his mouth and eyes opened with silent shock. The heir to the throne of the Union fell away from West, his hands clutching vainly, turning slowly to his side in the air . . . and he was gone.

There was a short, breathy cry, a thumping sound, and another, a long clattering of stones.

Then silence.

West stood there, blinking.

He turned to look at Cathil.

She was frozen, a couple of strides away, eyes gawping wide open.

'You . . . you . . .'

'I know.' It hardly sounded like his voice. He edged to the very brink of the cliff, and peered over. Ladislá's corpse lay drooped face down over the rocks far below, West's ragged coat spread out behind him, trousers round his ankles, one knee bent back the wrong way, a ring of dark blood spreading out across the stones around his broken head. Never had anyone looked more dead.

West swallowed. He had done that. Him. He had killed the heir to the throne. He had murdered him in cold blood. He was a criminal. He was a traitor. He was a monster.

And he almost wanted to laugh. The sunny Agriont, where loyalty and deference were given without question, where commoners did what their betters told them, where the killing of other people was simply not the done thing, all this was very far away. Monster he might be, but, out here in the frozen wilderness of Angland, the rules were different. Monsters were in the majority.

He felt a hand clap him heavily on the shoulder. He looked up to see Black Dow's earless head beside him, peering down. The Northman whistled softly through pursed lips. 'Well, that's the end of that, I reckon. You know what,

Furious?’ And he grinned sideways at West. ‘I’m getting to like you, boy.’

To the Last Man

To Sand dan Glokta,

Superior of Dagoska, and for his eyes alone.

It is clear that, in spite of your efforts, Dagoska cannot remain in Union hands for much longer. I therefore order you to leave immediately and present yourself to me. The docks may have been lost, but you should have no trouble slipping away by night in a small boat. A ship will be waiting for you down the coast.

You will confer overall command on General Vissbruck, as the only Union member of Dagoska's ruling council left alive in the city. It need hardly be said that the orders of the Closed Council to the defenders of Dagoska remain the same.

To fight to the last man.

Sult

Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.

General Vissbruck slowly lowered the letter, his jaws locked tight together. 'Are we to understand then, Superior, that you are leaving us?' His voice was cracking slightly. *With panic? With fear? With anger? Who could blame him, for any one of them?*

The room was much the same as it had been the first day Glokta arrived in the city. The superb mosaics, the masterful carvings, the polished table, all shining in the early morning sun streaming through the tall windows. *The ruling council itself, however, is sadly reduced.* Vissbruck, his jowls bulging over the stiff collar of his embroidered jacket, and Haddish Kahdia, slumped tiredly in his chair, were all that remained. Nicomo Cosca stood apart, leaning against the wall near the window and picking his fingernails.

Glokta took a deep breath. 'The Arch Lector wants me to . . . explain myself.'

Vissbruck gave a squeaky chuckle. 'For some reason, the image of rats fleeing a burning house springs to mind.' *An apt metaphor. If the rats are fleeing the flames to fling themselves into a mincing machine.*

'Come now, General.' Cosca let his head roll back against the wall, a faint smile on his lips. 'The Superior didn't have to come to us with this. He could have stolen away in the night, and no one any the wiser. That's what I'd have done.'

'Allow me to have scant regard for what you might have done,' sneered Vissbruck. 'Our situation is critical. The land walls are lost, and with them all chance of holding out for long. The slums swarm with Gurmish soldiers. Every night we make sallies from the gates of the Upper City. We burn a ram. We kill some sentries while they sleep. But every day they bring up more equipment. Soon, perhaps, they will have cleared space down among the hovels and assembled their great catapults. Shortly thereafter, one imagines, the Upper City will come under sustained fire from incendiaries!' He stabbed an arm at the window. 'They might even reach the Citadel from there! This very room may sport a boulder the size of a woodshed as a centrepiece!'

'I am well aware of our position,' snapped Glokta. *The stench of panic the last few days has grown strong enough almost for the dead to smell it.* 'But the Arch Lector's orders are most specific. To fight to the last man. No surrender.'

Vissbruck's shoulders slumped. 'Surrender would do no good in any case.' He got up, made a half-hearted attempt to straighten his uniform, then slowly pushed his chair under the table. Glokta almost pitied him at that moment. *Probably he is deserving of pity, but I wasted all I had on Carlot dan Eider, who hardly deserved it at all.*

'Allow me to offer you one piece of advice, from a man who's seen the inside of a Gurkish prison. If the city should fall, I strongly recommend that you take your own life rather than be captured.'

General Vissbruck's eyes widened for a moment, then he looked down at the beautiful mosaic floor, and swallowed. When he lifted his face Glokta was surprised to see a bitter smile. 'This is hardly what I had in mind when I joined the army.'

Glokta tapped his ruined leg with his cane, and gave a twisted grin of his own. 'I could say the same. What did Stolicus write? "The recruiting sergeant sells dreams but delivers nightmares?"'

'That would seem appropriate to the case.'

'If it's any comfort, I doubt that my fate will be even as pleasant as yours.'

'A small one.' And Vissbruck snapped his well-polished heels together and stood to vibrating attention. He remained like that for a moment, frozen, then turned without a word for the door, soles clicking loud against the floor and dying away in the corridor outside.

Glokta looked over at Kahdia. 'Regardless of what I said to the General, I would urge you to surrender the city at the earliest opportunity.'

Kahdia's tired eyes slid up. 'After all this? Now?'

Especially now. 'Perhaps the Emperor will choose to be merciful. In any case, I can see little advantage for you in fighting on. As things stand, there is still something to bargain with. You might be able to get some kind of terms.'

'And that is the comfort you offer? The Emperor's mercy?'

'That's all I have. What did you tell me about a man lost in the desert?'

Kahdia nodded slowly. 'Whatever the outcome, I would like to thank you.'

Thank me, you fool? 'For what? Destroying your city and leaving you to the Emperor's mercy?'

'For treating us with some measure of respect.'

Glokta snorted. 'Respect? I thought I simply told you whatever you wanted to hear, in order to get what I needed.'

'Perhaps so. But thanks cost nothing. God go with you.'

'God will not follow where I am going,' Glokta muttered, as Kahdia shuffled slowly from the room.

Cosca grinned down his long nose. 'Back to Adua, eh, Superior?'

'Back, as you say, to Adua.' *Back to the House of Questions. Back to Arch Lector Sult.* The thought was hardly a happy one.

'Perhaps I'll see you there.'

'You think so?' *More likely you'll be butchered along with all the rest when the city falls. Then you'll miss your opportunity to see me hanged.*

'If I've learned one thing, it's that there's always a chance.' Cosca grinned as

he pushed himself away from the wall and strutted towards the door, one hand rested jauntily on the pommel of his sword. 'I hate to lose a good employer.'

'I'd hate to be lost. But prepare yourself for the possibility of disappointment. Life is full of them.' *And the manner of its ending is often the greatest one of all.*

'Well then. If one of us should be disappointed.' And Cosca bowed in the doorway with a theatrical flourish, the flaking gilt on his once magnificent breastplate glinting in a shaft of morning sunlight. 'It has been an honour.'

Glokta sat on the bed, tonguing at his empty gums and rubbing his throbbing leg. He looked around his quarters. *Or Davoust's quarters. That's where an old wizard terrified me in the middle of the night. That's where I watched the city burn. That's where I was nearly eaten by a fourteen-year-old girl. Ah, the happy memories . . .*

He grimaced as he pushed himself up and limped over to the one box he had brought with him. *And this is where I signed a receipt for one million marks, advanced by the banking house of Valint and Balk.* He slid the flat leather case that Mauthis had given him out of his coat pocket. *Half a million marks in polished stones, barely touched.* He felt again the tugging temptation to open it, to dig his hand inside and feel that cool, hard, clicking distillation of wealth between his fingers. He resisted with an effort, bent down with a greater one, pushed some of the folded clothes aside with one hand and dug the case down under them with the other. *Black, black and black. I really should get a more varied wardrobe—*

'Going without saying goodbye?'

Glokta jerked violently up from his stoop and nearly vomited at a searing spasm through his back. He reached out with one arm and slammed the box lid down just in time to flop onto it before his leg buckled. Vitari was standing in the doorway, frowning over at him.

'Damn it!' he hissed, blowing spit through the gaps in his teeth with every heaving breath, left leg numb as wood, right leg cramping up with agony.

She padded into the room, narrowed eyes sliding left and right. *Checking that there's no one else here. A private interview, then.* His heart was starting to beat fast as she slowly shut the door, and not just from the spasms in his leg. The key rattled in the lock. *Just the two of us. How terribly exciting.*

She paced silently across the carpet, her long black shadow stretching out towards him. 'I thought we had a deal,' hissed out from behind her mask.

'So did I,' snapped Glokta, struggling to find a more dignified position. 'Then I got a little note from Sult. He wants me back, and I think we can all guess why.'

'Not because of anything I told him.'

'So you say.'

Her eyes narrowed further, her feet padded closer. 'We had a deal. I kept my end.'

'Good for you! You can console yourself with that thought when I'm floating face down in the docks in Adua and you're stuck here, waiting for the Gurkish

to break down the—oof!’

And she was on him, her weight grinding his twisted back into the box, squeezing the air from him in a ragged wheeze. There was a bright flash of metal and the rattle of a chain, her fingers slid round his neck.

‘You crippled worm! I should cut your fucking throat right now!’ Her knee jabbed painfully into his stomach, cold metal tickled gently at the skin on his neck, her blue eyes glared into his, flickering back and forth, glistening hard as the stones in the box under his back. *My death could be moments away. Easily.* He remembered watching her choke the life out of Eider. *With as little care as I might squash an ant, and I, poor cripple, just as helpless as one.* Perhaps he should have been gibbering with fear, but all he could think was: *when was the last time I had a woman on top of me?*

He snorted with laughter. ‘Don’t you know me at all?’ he blubbered, half chuckling, half sobbing, eyes watering with a sickening mixture of pain and amusement. ‘Superior Glokta, pleased to meet you! I don’t care a good shit what you do, and you know it. Threats? You’ll have to do a sight better than that, you ginger whore!’

Her eyes bulged with fury. Her shoulder came forwards, her elbow went back, ready to apply the greatest possible pressure. *Enough to cut my neck through to my twisted spine, I don’t doubt.*

Glokta felt his lips curl back in a sickly grin, wet with spit. *Now.*

He heard Vitari’s breath snorting behind her mask. *Do it.*

He felt the blade press against his neck, a chill touch, so sharp that he could hardly feel it. *I’m ready.*

Then she let out a long hiss, lifted the blade high and rammed it into the wood beside his head. She stood up and turned away from him. Glokta closed his eyes and breathed for a moment. *Still alive.* There was an odd feeling in his throat. *Relief, or disappointment? Hard to tell the difference.*

‘Please.’ It was said so softly that he thought he might have imagined it. Vitari was standing with her back to him, head bent over, fists clenched and trembling.

‘What?’

‘Please.’ *She did say it. And it hurts her to do it, you can tell.*

‘Please, eh? You think there’s any place here for please? Why the hell should I save you, really? You came here to spy for Sult. You’ve done nothing but get in my way ever since you got here! It’s hard to think of anyone I trust less, and I don’t trust anyone!’

She turned back to face him, reached behind her head, took hold of the straps of her mask, and pulled it off. There was a sharp tan line underneath: brown round her eyes, her forehead, her neck, white round her mouth with a pink mark across the bridge of her nose. Her face was far softer, much younger, more ordinary than he had expected. She no longer looked fearsome. She looked scared and desperate. Glokta felt suddenly, ludicrously awkward, as though he had blundered into a room and caught someone naked. He almost had to look away as she kneeled down level with him.

‘Please.’ Her eyes looked moist, dewy, her lip trembling as if she was on the very point of weeping. *A glimpse at the secret hopes beneath the vicious shell? Or just a good act?* Glokta felt his eyelid fluttering. ‘It’s not for myself,’ she almost

whispered. 'Please. I'm begging you.'

He rubbed his hand thoughtfully across his neck. When he took it away there was blood on his fingertip. The faintest brown smear. *A nick. A graze. Just a hair's breadth further, and I'd be pumping blood all over the lovely carpet right now. Only a hair's breadth. Lives turn on such chances. Why should I save her?*

But he knew why. *Because I don't save many.*

He turned painfully round on the box so his back was to her and sat there, kneading at the dead flesh of his left leg. He took a deep breath. 'Alright,' he snapped.

'You won't regret it.'

'I regret it already. Damn but I'm a fool for crying women! And you can carry your own damn luggage!' He looked round, raising a finger, but Vitari already had the mask back on. Her eyes were dry, and narrow, and fierce. *They look like eyes that couldn't shed a tear in a hundred years.*

'Don't worry.' She jerked on the chain round her wrist and the cross-shaped blade sprang from the lid of the box and slapped into her waiting palm. 'I travel light.'

Glokta watched the flames reflected in the calm surface of the bay. Shifting fragments, red, yellow, sparkling white in the black water. Frost pulled at the oars, smoothly, evenly, his pale face half lit by the flickering fires in the city, expressionless. Severard sat behind him, hunched over, glowering out across the water. Vitari was beyond, in the prow, her head no more than a spiky outline. The blades dipped into the sea and feathered the water with barely a sound. It hardly seemed that the boat moved. Rather the dark outline of the peninsula slipped slowly away from them, into the darkness.

What have I done? Consigned a city full of people to death or slavery, for what? For the King's honour? A drooling halfwit who can scarcely control his bowels, let alone a country. For my pride? Hah. I threw it all away long ago, along with my teeth. For Sult's approval? My reward is like to be a rope collar and a long drop.

He could just see the darker outline of the rock against the dark night sky, the craggy form of the citadel perched on top of it. Perhaps even the slender shapes of the spires of the Great Temple. All moving off into the past.

What could I have done differently? I could have thrown in my lot with Eider and the rest. Given the city away to the Gurkish without a fight. Would that have changed anything? Glokta licked sourly at his empty gums. The Emperor would have set about his purges just the same. Sult would have sent for me, just as he has done. Little differences, hardly worth commenting on. What did Shickel say? Few indeed are those who get a choice.

A chill breeze blew and Glokta pulled his coat tight around him, folded his arms across his chest, winced as he worked his numb foot back and forward in his boot, trying to make the blood flow. The city was nothing but a dusting of pinprick lights, far away.

It is just as Eider said – all so the Arch Lector and his like can point at a map and say this dot or that is ours. His mouth twitched into a smile. And after all the efforts, all the sacrifices, all the scheming, and plotting, and killing, we could not

even hold the city. All that pain, for what?

There was no reply, of course. Only the calm waves lapping against the side of the boat, the soft creaking of the rowlocks, the soothing slap, slap of the oars on the water. He wanted to feel disgust at himself. Guilt at what he had done. Pity for all those left behind to Gurmish mercy. *The way other men might. The way I might have, long ago.* But it was hard to feel much of anything beyond the overwhelming tiredness and the endless, nagging ache up his leg, through his back, into his neck. He winced as he sagged back on his wooden seat, searching, as always, for a less painful position. *There is no need to punish myself, after all.*

Punishment will come soon enough.

Jewel of Cities

At least he could ride now. The splints had come off that morning, and Jezal's sore leg knocked painfully against his horse's flank as it moved. His hand was numb and clumsy on the reins, his arm weak and aching without the dressing. His teeth still throbbed dully with every thump of the hooves on the ruined road. But at least he was out of the cart, and that was something. Small things seemed to make him very happy these days.

The others rode in a sombre, silent group, grim as mourners at a funeral, and Jezal hardly blamed them. It was a sombre sort of place. A plain of dirt. Of fissures of bare rock. Of sand and stone, empty of life. The sky was a still white nothing, heavy as pale lead, promising rain but never quite delivering. They rode clustered round the cart as though huddling for warmth, the only warm things in a hundred miles of cold desert, the only moving things in a place frozen in time, the only living things in a dead country.

The road was wide, but the stones were cracked and buckled. In places whole stretches of it had crumbled away, in others flows of mud had covered it entirely. The dead stumps of trees jutted from the bare earth to either side. Bayaz must have seen him looking at them.

'An avenue of proud oaks lined this road for twenty miles from the city gates. In summer their leaves shimmered and shook in the wind over the plain. Juvens planted them with his own hands, in the Old Time, when the Empire was young, long before even I was born.'

The mutilated stumps were grey and dry, splintered edges still showing the marks of saws. 'They look as if they were cut down months ago.'

'Many long years, my boy. When Glustrod seized the city, he had them all felled to feed his furnaces.'

'Then why have they not rotted?'

'Even rot is a kind of life. There is no life here.'

Jezal swallowed and hunched his shoulders, watching the chunks of long dead wood file slowly past like rows of tomb-stones. 'I don't like this,' he muttered under his breath.

'You think I do?' Bayaz frowned grimly over at him. 'You think any of us do? Men must sometimes do what they do not like if they are to be remembered. It is through struggle, not ease, that fame and honour are won. It is through conflict, not peace, that wealth and power are gained. Do such things no longer interest you?'

'Yes,' muttered Jezal, 'I suppose . . .' But he was far from sure. He looked out across the sea of dead dirt. There was precious little sign of honour out here, let alone wealth, and it was hard to see where fame would come from. He was already well known to the only five people within a hundred miles. Besides, he was starting to wonder if a long, poor life in utter obscurity would really be such a terrible thing.

Perhaps, when he got home, he would ask Ardee to marry him. He amused himself by imagining her smile when he suggested it. No doubt she would make him squirm, waiting for an answer. No doubt she would keep him dangling. No doubt she would say yes. What, after all, was the worst that could happen? Would his father be angry? Would they be forced to live on his officer's pay? Would his shallow friends and his idiot brothers chuckle at his back to see him so reduced in the world? He almost laughed to think that those had seemed weighty reasons.

A life of hard work with the woman he loved beside him? A rented house in an unfashionable part of town, with cheap furniture but a cosy fire? No fame, no power, no wealth, but a warm bed with Ardee in it, waiting for him . . . That hardly seemed like such a terrible fate now that he had looked death in the face, when he was living on a bowl of porridge a day and feeling grateful to get it, when he was sleeping alone out in the wind and the rain.

His grin grew wider, and the feeling of the sore skin stretching across his jaw was almost pleasant. That did not seem like such a bad life at all.

The great walls thrust up sheer, scabbed with broken battlements, blistered with shattered towers, scarred with black cracks and slick with wet. A cliff of dark stone, curving away out of sight into the grey drizzle, the bare earth in front of it pooled with brown water and scattered with toppled blocks as big as coffins.

‘Aulcus,’ growled Bayaz, jaw set hard. ‘Jewel of cities.’

‘I don’t see it sparkling,’ grunted Ferro.

Neither did Logen. The slimy road slunk up to a crumbling archway, gaping open, full of shadows, the doors themselves long gone. He had an awful feeling as he looked at that dark gate. A sick feeling. Like the one he had when he looked into the open door of the Maker’s House. As if he was looking into a grave, and possibly his own. All he could think about was turning round and never coming back. His horse nickered softly and took a step away, its breath smoking in the misty rain. The hundreds of long and dangerous miles back to the sea seemed suddenly an easier journey than the few strides to that gate.

‘Are you sure about this?’ he murmured to Bayaz.

‘Am I sure? No, of course not! I brought us weary leagues across the barren plain on a whim! I spent years planning the journey, and gathered this little group from all across the Circle of the World for no reason beyond my own amusement! No harm will be done if we simply toddle back to Calcis. Am I sure?’ He shook his head as he urged his horse towards the yawning gateway.

Logen shrugged his shoulders. ‘Only asking.’ The arch gaped wider, and wider, then swallowed them whole. The sound of the horses’ hooves echoed down the long tunnel, clattering around them in the darkness. The weight of stone all around pressed in close and seemed to make it hard to take a breath. Logen put his head down, frowning towards the circle of light at the far end as it grew steadily bigger. He glanced sideways and caught Luthar’s eye, licking his lips nervously in the gloom, wet hair plastered to his face.

And then they came out into the open.

‘My, my,’ breathed Longfoot. ‘My, my, my . . .’

Colossal buildings rose up on either side of a vast square. The ghosts of tall pillars and high roofs, of towering columns and great walls, all made for giants, loomed from the haze of rain. Logen gawped. They all did, a tiny huddled group in that outside space, like scared sheep in a bare valley, waiting for the wolves to come.

Rain hissed on stone high overhead, falling water splattered on the slick cobbles, trickled down the crumbling walls, gurgled in the cracks in the road. The thudding of hooves fell muffled. The cartwheels gently croaked and groaned. No other noise. No bustle, no din, no chatter of crowds. No birds calling, no dogs barking, no clatter of trade and commerce. Nothing lived. Nothing moved. There were only the great black buildings, stretching far away into the rain, and the ripped clouds crawling across the dark sky above.

They rode slowly past the ruins of some fallen temple, a tangled mass of dripping blocks and slabs, sections of its monstrous columns scattered on their sides across the broken paving, fragments from its roof thrown wide, still lying where they fell. Luthar's wet face, apart from the pink stain across his chin, was chalky white as he gazed up at the soaring wreckage to either side. 'Bloody hell,' he muttered.

'It is indeed,' murmured Longfoot under his breath, 'a most impressive sight.'

'The palaces of the wealthy dead,' said Bayaz. 'The temples where they prayed to angry gods. The markets where they bought and sold goods, and animals, and people. Where they bought and sold each other. The theatres, and the baths, and the brothels where they indulged their passions, before Glustrod came.' He pointed across the square and down the valley of dripping stone beyond. 'This is the Caline Way. The greatest road of the city, and where the greatest citizens had their dwellings. It runs straight through, more or less, from the northern gate to the southern. Now listen to me,' he said, turning in his creaking saddle. 'Three miles south of the city there is a high hill, with a temple on its summit. The Saturline Rock, they called it in the Old Time. If we should become separated, that is where we will meet.'

'Why would we be separated?' asked Luthar, his eyes wide.

'The earth in the city is . . . unquiet, and prone to tremble. The buildings are ancient, and unstable. I hope that we will pass through without incident but . . . it would be rash to rely on hope alone. If anything should happen, head south. Toward the Saturline Rock. Until then, stay close together.'

That hardly needed saying. Logen looked over at Ferro as they set off into the city, her black hair spiky, her dark face dewy with wet, frowning up suspiciously at the towering buildings to either side. 'If anything should happen,' he whispered to her, 'help me out, eh?'

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded. 'If I can, pink.'

'Good enough.'

The only thing worse than a city full of people is a city with no people at all.

Ferro rode with her bow in one hand, the reins in the other, staring to both sides, peering down the alleys, into the gaping windows and doorways, straining to see round the crumbling corners and over the broken walls. She

did not know what she was looking for.

But she would be ready.

They all felt as she did, she could see it. She watched the fibres of jaw muscle tensing and relaxing, tensing and relaxing, over and over, on the side of Ninefingers' head as he frowned off into the ruins, his hand never far from the grip of his sword, scored cold metal shining with beads of moisture.

Luthar jumped at every noise – at the crack of a stone under the cartwheels, at the splatter of falling water into a pool, at the snort of one of the horses, his head jerking this way and that, the tip of his tongue licking endlessly at the slot in his lip.

Quai sat on the cart, bent over with his wet hair flapping round his gaunt face, pale lips pressed together into a hard line. Ferro watched him snap the reins, saw he was gripping them so tightly that the tendons stood out stark from the backs of his thin hands. Longfoot stared about him at the endless ruins, eyes and mouth hanging slightly open, rivulets of water occasionally streaking through the stubble on his knobbly skull. For once he had nothing to say – the one small advantage of this place abandoned by God.

Bayaz was trying to look confident, but Ferro knew better. She watched his hand tremble when he took it from the reins to rub the water from his thick brows. She watched his mouth work when they stopped at junctions, watched him squinting into the rain, trying to reckon the right course. She saw his worry and his doubt written in his every movement. He knew as well as she did. This place was not safe.

Click-clank.

It came faint through the rain, like the sound of a hammer on a distant anvil. The sound of weapons being made ready. She stood up in her stirrups, straining to listen.

'Do you hear that?' she snapped at Ninefingers.

He paused, squinting off at nothing, listening. Click-clank. He nodded slowly. 'I hear it.' He slid his sword out from its sheath.

'What?' Luthar stared around wild-eyed, fumbling for his own weapons.

'There's nothing out there,' grumbled Bayaz.

She jabbed her palm at them to stop, slid down from her saddle and crept up to the corner of the next building, nocking an arrow to her bow, back sliding across the rough surface of the huge stone blocks. Clank-click. She could feel Ninefingers following, moving carefully, a reassuring presence behind her.

She slid round the corner onto one knee, peering across an empty square, pocked with pools and strewn with rubble. There was a high tower at the far corner, leaning over to one side, wide windows hanging open at its summit under a tarnished dome. Something was moving in there, slowly. Something dark, rocking back and forth. She almost smiled to have something she could point an arrow at.

It was a good feeling, having an enemy.

Then she heard hooves and Bayaz rode past, out into the ruined square. 'Ssss!' she hissed at him, but he ignored her.

'You can put your weapons away,' he called over his shoulder. 'It's nothing but an old bell, clicking in the wind. The city was full of them. You should

have heard them pealing out, when an Emperor was born, or crowned, or married, or welcomed back from a victorious campaign.' He started to raise his arms, voice growing louder. 'The air split with their joyous ringing, and birds rose up from every square and street and roof and filled the sky!' He was shouting now, bellowing it out. 'And the people lined the streets! And they leaned from their windows! And they showered the beloved with flower petals! And cheered until their voices were hoarse!' He started to laugh, and he let his arms fall, and high above him the broken bell clicked and clanked in the wind. 'Long ago. Come on.'

Quai snapped the reins and the cart trundled off after the Magus. Ninefingers shrugged at her and sheathed his sword. Ferro stayed a moment, staring up suspiciously at the stark outline of that leaning tower, dark clouds flowing past above it.

Click-clank.

Then she followed the others.

The statues swam up out of the angry rain, one pair of frozen giants at a time, their faces all worn down by the long years until every one was the featureless same. Water trickled over smooth marble, dripped from long beards, from armoured skirts, from arms outstretched in threat or blessing, amputated long ago at the wrist, or the elbow, or the shoulder. Some were worked with bronze: huge helmets, swords, sceptres, crowns of leaves, all turned chalky green leaving dirty streaks down the gleaming stone. The statues swam up out of the angry rain, and one pair of giants at a time they vanished into the rain behind, consigned to the mists of history.

'Emperors,' said Bayaz. 'Hundreds of years of them.'

Jeza! watched the rulers of antiquity file menacingly past, looming over the broken road, his neck aching from looking up, the rain tickling at his face. The sculptures were twice the height or more of the ones in the Agriont, but there was similarity enough to cause a sudden wave of homesickness.

'Just like to the Kingsway, in Adua.'

'Huh,' grunted Bayaz. 'Where do you think I got the idea?'

Jeza! was just absorbing that bizarre comment when he noticed that the statues they were approaching now were the last pair, one tilted over at a worrying angle.

'Hold up the cart!' called Bayaz, raising one wet palm and nudging his horse forward.

Not only were there no more Emperors before them, there was no road at all. A dizzy drop yawned out of the earth, a mighty crack in the fabric of the city. Squinting across, Jeza! could just see the far side, a cliff of broken rock and crumbled mud. Beyond were the faint wraiths of walls and pillars, the outline of the wide avenue, melting out of sight and back as the rain swept through the empty air between.

Longfoot cleared his throat. 'I take it we will not be carrying on this way.'

Ever so carefully Jeza! leaned from his saddle and peered down. Far below dark water moved, foaming and churning, washing at the tortured ground beneath the foundations of the city, and out of this subterranean sea stuck

broken walls, and shattered towers, and the cracked open shells of monstrous buildings. At the top of one tottering column a statue still stood, some hero long dead. His hand must once have been raised in triumph. Now it stuck up in desperation, as if he was pleading for someone to drag him from his watery hell.

Jezal sat back, feeling suddenly dizzy. 'We will not be carrying on this way,' he managed to croak.

Bayaz frowned grimly down at the grinding water. 'Then we must find another, and quickly. The city is full of these cracks. We have miles to go even on a straight course, and a bridge to cross.'

Longfoot frowned. 'Providing it still stands.'

'It still stands! Kanedias built to last.' The First of the Magi peered up into the rain. The sky was already bruising, a dark weight hanging above their heads. 'We cannot afford to linger. We will not make it through the city before dark as it is.'

Jezal looked up at the Magus, horrified. 'We'll be here overnight?'

'Clearly,' snapped Bayaz, turning his horse away from the brink.

The ruins crowded in tighter around them as they left the Caline Way behind and struck out into the thick of the city. Jezal gazed up at the threatening shadows, looming from the murk. The only thing he could imagine worse than being trapped in this place by day was being kept there in the darkness. He would have preferred to spend the night in hell. But what would have been the difference?

The river surged below them through a man-made canyon – tall embankments of smooth, wet stone. The mighty Aos, imprisoned in that narrow space, foamed with infinite, mindless fury, chewing at the polished rock and spitting angry spray high into the air. Ferro could not imagine how anything could have lasted for long above that deluge, but Bayaz had been right.

The Maker's bridge still stood.

'In all my wide travels, in every city and nation under the bountiful sun, I have never seen such a wonder.' Longfoot slowly shook his shaven head. 'How can a bridge be made from metal?'

But metal it was. Dark, smooth, lustreless, gleaming with drops of water. It soared across the dizzy space in one simple arch, impossibly delicate, a spider's web of thin rods criss-crossing the hollow air beneath it, a wide road of slotted metal plates stretching out perfectly level across the top, inviting them to cross. Every edge was sharp, every curve precise, every surface clean. It stood pristine in the midst of all that slow decay. 'As if it was finished yesterday,' muttered Quai.

'And yet it is perhaps the oldest thing in the city.' Bayaz nodded towards the ruins behind them. 'All the achievements of Juvens are laid waste. Fallen, broken, forgotten, almost as though they had never been. But the works of the Master Maker are undiminished. They shine the brighter, if anything, for they shine in a darkened world.' He snorted, and mist blew from his nostrils. 'Who knows? Perhaps they will still stand whole and unmarked at the end of time, long after all of us are in our graves.'

Luthar peered nervously down towards the thundering water, no doubt wondering if his grave might be there. 'You're sure it will carry us?'

'In the Old Time it carried thousands of people a day. Tens of thousands. Horses and carts and citizens and slaves in an endless procession, flowing both ways, day and night. It will carry us.' Ferro watched as the hooves of Bayaz' horse clanged out onto the metal.

'This Maker was plainly a man of . . . quite remarkable talents,' murmured the Navigator, urging his horse after.

Quai snapped his reins. 'He was indeed. All lost to the world.'

Ninefingers went next, then Luthar reluctantly followed. Ferro stayed where she was, sitting in the pattering rain, frowning at the bridge, at the cart, at the four horses and their riders. She did not like this. The river, the bridge, the city, none of it. It had been feeling more and more like a trap with every step, and now she felt sure of it. She should never have listened to Yulwei. She should never have left the South. She had no business here, out in this freezing, wet, deserted wasteland with this gang of godless pinks.

'I am not going over that,' she said.

Bayaz turned to look at her. 'Do you plan to fly across, then? Or simply stay on that side?'

She sat back and crossed her hands before her on the saddle-bow. 'Perhaps I will.'

'It might be better to discuss such matters once we have made it through the city,' murmured Brother Longfoot, looking nervously back into the empty streets.

'He's right,' said Luthar. 'This place has an evil air—'

'Shit on its air,' growled Ferro, 'and shit on you. Why should I cross? What is it exactly, that is so useful to me about that side of a river? You have promised me vengeance, old pink, and given me nothing but lies, and rain, and bad food. Why should I take another stride with you? Tell me that!'

Bayaz frowned. 'My brother Yulwei helped you in the desert. You would have been killed if not for him. You gave him your word—'

'Word? Hah! A word is an easy chain to break, old man.' And she jerked her wrists apart in front of her. 'There. I am free of it. I did not promise to make a slave of myself!'

The Magus gave vent to a long sigh, slumping wearily forward in his saddle. 'As if life were not hard enough without your contributions. Why is it, Ferro, that you would rather make things difficult than easy?'

'Perhaps God had some purpose in mind when he made me so, but I do not know it. What is the Seed?'

Straight to the root of the matter. The old pink's eye seemed to give a sudden twitch as she said the word. 'Seed?' muttered Luthar, baffled.

Bayaz frowned at the puzzled faces of the others. 'It might be better not to know.'

'Not good enough. If you fall asleep for a week again, I want to know what we are doing, and why.'

'I am well recovered now,' snapped Bayaz, but Ferro knew it for a lie. Every part of him seemed shrunken, older and weaker than it had been. He might have been awake, and talking, but he was far from recovered. It would take

more than bland assurances to fool her. 'It will not happen again, you can depend on—'

'I will ask you one more time, and hope at last for a simple answer. What is the Seed?'

Bayaz looked at her for a long moment, and she looked back. 'Very well. We will sit in the rain and discuss the nature of things.' And he nudged his horse back off the bridge until it was no more than a stride away. 'The Seed is one name for that thing that Glustrod dug for in the deep earth. It is that thing he used to do all this.'

'This?' grunted Ninefingers.

'All this.' And the First of the Magi swept his arm towards the wreckage that surrounded them. 'The Seed made a ruin of the greatest city in the world, and blighted the land about it from now until eternity.'

'It is a weapon, then?' murmured Ferro.

'It is a stone,' said Quai suddenly, hunched on his cart, looking at no one. 'A rock from the world below. Left behind, buried, when Euz cast the devils from our world. It is the Other Side made flesh. The very stuff of magic.'

'It is indeed,' whispered Bayaz. 'My congratulations, Master Quai. One subject at least of which you are not entirely ignorant. Well? Answers enough for you, Ferro?'

'A rock did all this?' Ninefingers did not look happy. 'What in hell do we want with it?'

'I think some among us can guess.' Bayaz was looking at Ferro, right in the eye, and smiling a sickly grin, as if he knew exactly what she thought. Perhaps he did.

It was no secret.

Stories of devils, and digging, and old wet ruins, none of that mattered to Ferro. She was busy imagining the Empire of Gurkhul made a dead land. Its people vanished. Its Emperor forgotten. Its cities brought to dust. Its power a faded memory. Her mind churned with thoughts of death and vengeance. Then she smiled.

'Good,' she said. 'But why do you need me?'

'Who says I do need you that badly?'

She snorted at him. 'I doubt you would have suffered me this long if you didn't.'

'True enough.'

'Then why?'

'Because the Seed cannot be touched. It is painful even to look upon. We came into the shattered city with the Emperor's army, after the fall of Glustrod, searching for survivors. We found none. Only horrors, and ruins, and bodies. Too many of those to count. Thousands upon thousands we buried, in pits for a hundred each, all through the city. It was long work, and while we were about it a company of soldiers found something strange in the ruins. Their Captain wrapped it in his cloak and brought it to Juvens. By dusk he had withered and died, and his company were not spared. Their hair fell out, their bodies shrivelled. Within a week all hundred men were corpses. But Juvens himself was unharmed.' He nodded at the cart. 'That is why Kanedias made the box, and that is why we have it with us now. To protect us. None of

us are safe. Except for you.'

'Why me?'

'Did you never wonder why you are not as others are? Why you see no colours? Why you feel no pain? You are what Juvens was, and Kanedias. You are what Glustrod was. You are what Euz himself was, if it comes to that.'

'Devil-blood,' murmured Quai. 'Blessed and cursed.'

Ferro glowered at him. 'What do you mean?'

'You are descended from demons.' And one corner of the apprentice's mouth curled up in a knowing smile. 'Far back into the Old Time and beyond, perhaps, but still, you are not entirely human. You are a relic. A last weak trace of the blood of the Other Side.'

Ferro opened her mouth to snarl an insult back at him but Bayaz cut her off.

'There can be no denying it, Ferro. I would not have brought you if there were any doubt. But you should not seek to deny it. You should embrace it. It is a rare gift. You can touch the Seed. Perhaps only you in all the wide Circle of the World. Only you can touch it, and only you can carry it to war.' He leaned close and whispered to her. 'But only I can make it burn. Hot enough to turn all Gurkhul to a desert. Hot enough to make bitter ashes of Khalul and all his servants. Hot enough to make such vengeance that even you will have your fill of it, and more. Are you coming now?' And he clicked his tongue, pulling his horse away and back onto the bridge.

Ferro frowned at the old pink's back as she rode after him, chewing hard at her lip. When she licked it, she tasted blood. Blood, but no pain. She did not like to believe anything the Magus said, but there was no denying that she was not as others were. She remembered she had bitten Aruf once, and he had told her that she must have had a snake for a mother. Why not a demon? She watched the water thundering by far below, through the slots in the metal, frowning, and thinking on vengeance.

'Don't hardly matter whose blood you've got.' Ninefingers was riding beside her. Riding badly, as usual, and looking across, voice gentle. 'Man makes his own choices, my father used to tell me. Reckon that goes for women just as much.'

Ferro did not answer. She dragged on her reins and let the others pull ahead. Woman, or demon, or snake, it made no difference. Her concern was hurting the Gurkish. Her hatred was strong, and deep-rooted, warm and familiar. Her oldest friend.

She could trust nothing else.

Ferro was the last one off the bridge. She took a look back over her shoulder as they moved off into the crumbling city, towards the ruins they had come from, half hidden on the far bank by the grey shroud of drizzle.

'Ssss!' She jerked on her reins, glaring over the surging water, eyes flicking over the hundreds of empty windows, the hundreds of empty doorways, the hundreds of cracks and gaps and spaces in the crumbling walls.

'What did you see?' came Ninefingers' worried voice.

'Something.' But she saw nothing now. Along the crumbling embankment the endless shells of buildings squatted, empty and lifeless.

'There is nothing left alive in this place,' said Bayaz. 'Night will find us soon, and I for one could do with a roof to keep the rain off my old bones tonight.'

Your eyes are playing tricks.'

Ferro scowled. Her eyes played no tricks, devil's eyes or no. There was something out there, in the city. She felt it.

Watching them.

Luck

‘Up you get, Luthar.’ Jezal’s eyes fluttered open. It was so bright that he ‘could hardly make out where he was, and he grunted and blinked, shading his eyes with one hand. Someone had been shaking his shoulder. Ninefingers.

‘We need to be on our way.’

Jezal sat up. Sunlight was streaming into the narrow chamber, straight into his face, specks of dust floating in the glare. ‘Where is everyone?’ he croaked, tongue thick and lazy with sleep.

The Northman jerked his shaggy head towards the tall window. Squinting, Jezal could just see Brother Longfoot standing there, looking out, hands clasped behind him. ‘Our Navigator’s taking in the view. Rest of the crew are out front, seeing to the horses, reckoning the route. Thought you might use a few minutes more under the blanket.’

‘Thanks.’ He could have used a few hours more yet. Jezal worked his sour mouth, licking at the aching holes in his teeth, the sore crease in his lip, checking how painful they were this morning. Every day the swelling was a little less. He was almost getting used to it.

‘Here.’ Jezal looked up to see Ninefingers tossing him a biscuit. He tried to catch it but his bad hand was still clumsy and it dropped in the dirt. The Northman shrugged. ‘Bit of dust won’t do you any harm.’

‘Daresay it won’t, at that.’ Jezal picked it up, brushed it off with the back of his hand and took a dry bite from it, making sure to use the good side of his mouth. He threw his blanket back, rolled over and pushed himself stiffly from the ground.

Logen watched him take a few trial steps, arms spread out wide for balance, biscuit clutched in one hand. ‘How’s the leg?’

‘It’s been worse.’ It had been better too. He walked with a fool of a limp, sore leg held straight. The knee and the ankle hurt every time he put his weight on it, but he could walk, and every morning it was improving. When he made it to the rough stone wall he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, half wanting to laugh, half wanting to cry with relief at the simple joy of being able to stand on his own feet again.

‘From now on I will be grateful for every moment that I can walk.’

Ninefingers grinned. ‘That feeling lasts a day or two, then you’ll be moaning about the food again.’

‘I will not,’ said Jezal firmly.

‘Alright. A week then.’ He walked towards the window at the far end of the room, casting a stretched-out shadow across the dusty floor. ‘In the meantime, you should have a look at this.’

‘At what?’ Jezal hopped up beside Brother Longfoot, leaned against the pitted column at the side of the window, breathing hard and shaking out his aching leg. Then he looked up, and his mouth fell open.

They must have been high up. At the top of the steep slope of a hill perhaps, looking out over the city. The just-risen sun hung level with Jezal's eyes, watery yellow through the morning haze. The sky was clear and pale above it, a few shreds of white cloud stretched out almost still.

Even in ruins, hundreds of years after its fall, the vista of Aulcus was breathtaking.

Broken roofs stretched away into the far distance, crumbling walls brightly lit or sunk in long shadows. Stately domes, teetering towers, leaping arches and proud columns thrust up above the jumble. He could make out the gaps left by wide squares, by broad avenues, the yawning space cut by the river, curving gently through the forest of stone on his right, light glittering on the shifting water. In every direction, as far as Jezal could see, wet stone glowed in the morning sun.

'And this is why I love to travel,' breathed Longfoot. 'At one stroke, in one moment, this whole journey has been made worthwhile. Has there ever been such another sight? How many men living can have gazed upon it? The three of us stand at a window upon history, at a gate into the long forgotten past. No longer will I dream of fair Talins, glittering on the sea in the red morning, or Ul-Nahb, glowing beneath the azure bowl of the heavens in the bright midday, or Ospria, proud upon her mountain slopes, lights shining like the stars in the soft evening. From this day forth, my heart will forever belong to Aulcus. Truly, the jewel of cities. Sublime beyond words in death, dare one even dream of how she must have looked in life? Who could not be struck with wonder at the magnificence of this sight? Who could not be struck with awe at the—'

'A load of old buildings,' growled Ferro, right behind him. 'And it is past time we were out of them. Get your gear stowed.' And she turned and stalked off towards the entrance.

Jezal frowned back over his shoulder at the gleaming sweep of dark ruins, stretching away into the distant haze. There was no denying that it was magnificent, and yet it was frightening as well. The splendid buildings of Adua, the mighty walls and towers of the Agriont: all that Jezal had thought of as magnificent seemed mean and feeble copies. He felt like a tiny, ignorant boy, from a small and barbaric country, in a petty, insignificant time. He was glad to turn away, and to leave the jewel of cities in the past where it belonged. He would not be dreaming of Aulcus.

Nightmares, maybe.

It must have been late morning when they came upon the only square in the city that was still crowded. A giant space, and thronging from one side to the other. A motionless, silent crowd. A crowd carved from stone.

Statues of every attitude, size, and material. There was black basalt and white marble, green alabaster and red porphyry, grey granite and a hundred other stones of which Jezal could not guess the names. The variety was strange enough, but it was the one thing they all had in common which he found truly worrying. Not one of them had a face.

Colossal features had been picked away leaving formless messes of pock-

marked rock. Small ones had been hacked out leaving empty craters of rough stone. Ugly messages in some script that Jezal did not recognise had been chiselled across marble chests, down arms, round necks, into foreheads. It seemed that everything in Aulcus had been done on an epic scale, and the vandalism was no exception.

There was a path cleared through the middle of this sinister wreckage, wide enough for the cart to pass. So Jezal rode out, at the front of the group, through a forest of faceless shapes, crowded in on either side like the throng at a procession of state.

‘What happened here?’ he murmured.

Bayaz frowned up at a head that might easily have been ten strides high, its lips still pressed into a powerful frown, its eyes and nose all chopped away, harsh writing cut deep into its cheek. ‘When Glustrod seized the city, he gave his cursed army one day to make free with its people. To satisfy their fury, and quench their lust for plunder, rape and murder. As though they could ever be satisfied.’ Ninefingers coughed and shifted uncomfortably in his saddle. ‘Then they were ordered to tear down all the statues of Juvens in the city. From every roof, from every hall, from every frieze and temple. There were many likenesses of my master in Aulcus, for the city was his design. But Glustrod was nothing if not thorough. He sought them all out, and had them gathered here, and defaced them all, and stamped into them terrible curses.’

‘Not a happy family.’ Jezal had never seen eye to eye with his own brothers, but this seemed to him a little excessive. He ducked away from the outstretched fingers of a giant hand, standing upright on its severed wrist, a ragged symbol chiselled savagely out of the palm.

‘What does it say?’

Bayaz frowned. ‘Believe me, it is better you do not know.’

A colossal building, even by the standards of this giant’s graveyard, towered over the army of sculptures at one side. Its steps were high as a city wall, the columns of its façade as thick as towers, its monstrous pediment encrusted with faded carvings. Bayaz reined his horse up before it and stared up. Jezal stopped behind him, glancing nervously at the others.

‘Let’s keep on.’ Ninefingers scratched at his face and stared round anxiously. ‘Let’s leave this place as quickly as we can, and never come back.’

Bayaz chuckled. ‘The Bloody-Nine, scared of shadows? I’d never have believed it.’

‘Every shadow’s cast by something,’ growled the Northman, but the First of the Magi was not to be put off.

‘We have time enough to stop,’ he said as he struggled from the saddle. ‘We are close to the edge of the city, now. An hour at the most and we are out and on our way. You might find this interesting, Captain Luthar. As would anyone else who would care to join me.’

Ninefingers cursed under his breath in his own tongue. ‘Alright, then. I’d rather walk than wait.’

‘You have quite piqued my curiosity,’ said Brother Longfoot as he jumped down next to them. ‘I must confess that the city does not seem so daunting in the light as it did in the rain of yesterday. Indeed, it is hard now to see why it has such a black reputation. Nowhere in all the Circle of the World can there

be such a collection of fascinating relics, and I am a curious man, and unashamed to admit it. Yes indeed, I have always been a—'

'We know what you are,' hissed Ferro. 'I'll wait here.'

'Please yourself.' Bayaz dragged his staff from his saddle. 'As always. You and Master Quai can no doubt each delight the other with comical tales while we are gone. I am almost sorry to miss the banter.' Ferro and the apprentice frowned at each other as the rest of them made their way between the ruined statues and up the wide steps, Jezal limping and wincing on his bad leg. They passed through a doorway as big as a house and into a cool, dim, silent space.

It reminded Jezal of the Lords' Round in Adua, but even bigger. A cavernous, circular chamber, like a great bowl with stepped seating up the sides, carved from stone of many colours, whole sections of it smashed and ruined. The bottom was choked with rubble, no doubt the remnants of a collapsed roof.

'Ah. The great dome fallen.' The Magus squinted up through the ragged space into the bright sky beyond. 'A fitting metaphor.' He sighed, shuffling slowly round the curving aisle between the marble shelves. Jezal frowned up at that vast weight of overhanging stone, wondering what might happen if a chunk of it should fall and hit him on the head. He doubted Ferro would be stitching that up. He had not the slightest idea why Bayaz wanted him here, but then he could have said that for the whole journey, and indeed he often had. So he took a deep breath and limped out after the Magus, Ninefingers just behind, the noises of their movement echoing around in the great space.

Longfoot picked his way among the broken steps and peered up at the fallen ceiling with a show of great interest. 'What was this place?' he called out, voice bouncing from the curved walls. 'Some manner of theatre?'

'In a sense,' replied Bayaz. 'This was the great chamber of the Imperial Senate. Here the Emperor sat in state, to hear debates between the wisest citizens of Aulus. Here decisions were made that have set the course of history.' He clambered up a step and shuffled further, pointed excitedly to the floor, voice shrill with excitement.

'It was on this precise spot, as I remember it, that Calica stood to address the senate, urging caution in the Empire's eastern expansion. It was down there that Juvens replied to him, arguing boldness, and carried the day. I watched them, spellbound. Twenty years old, and breathless with excitement. I still recall their arguments, in every detail. Words, my friends. There can be a greater power in words than in all the steel within the Circle of the World.'

'A blade in your ear still hurts more than a word in it, though,' whispered Logen. Jezal spluttered with laughter, but Bayaz did not seem to notice. He was too busy hurrying from one stone bench to another.

'Here Scarpus gave his exhortation on the dangers of decadence, on the true meaning of citizenship. The senate sat, entranced. His voice rang out like . . . like . . .' Bayaz plucked at the air with his hand, as though hoping to find the right word there. 'Bah. What does it matter now? There are no certainties left in the world. That was the age of great men, doing what was right.' He frowned down at the broken rubble choking the floor of the colossal room. 'This is the age of little men, doing what they must. Little men, with little dreams, walking in giant footsteps. Still, you can see it was a grand building

once!’

‘Er, yes . . .’ ventured Jezal, limping away from the others to peer at some friezes carved into the wall at the very back of the seating. Half-naked warriors, awkwardly posed, pushing at each other with spears. All grand, no doubt, but there was an unpleasant smell to the place. Like rot, like damp, like sweating animals. The odour of a badly cleaned stables. He peered into the shadows, wrinkling his nose. ‘What is that smell?’

Ninefingers sniffed the air, and his face fell in an instant. A picture of wide-eyed horror. ‘By the . . .’ He ripped his sword out, taking a step forward. Jezal turned, fumbling for the grips of his steels, a sudden fear pressing on his chest

...
He took it at first for some manner of beggar: a dark shape, swathed in rags, squatting on all fours in the darkness only a few paces away. Then he saw the hands; twisted and claw-like on the pitted stone. Then he saw the grey face, if you could call it a face; a chunk of hairless brow, a lumpen jaw bursting with outside teeth, a flat snout like a pig’s, tiny black eyes glinting with fury as it glared back at him. Something between a man and an animal, and more hideous by far than either. Jezal’s jaw dropped open, and he stood gawping. It scarcely seemed worth telling Ninefingers that he now believed him.

It was clear there were such things as Shanka in the world.

‘Get it!’ roared the Northman, scrambling up the steps of the great chamber, drawn sword in hand. ‘Kill it!’

Jezal shambled uncertainly towards the thing, but his leg was still halfway to useless and the creature was quick as a fox, turning and skittering across the cold stone towards a crack in the curving wall and wriggling through like a cat through a fence before he had got more than a few lurching steps.

‘It’s gone!’

Bayaz was already shuffling towards the entrance, the tapping of his staff on the marble echoing above them. ‘We see that, Master Luthar. We all very clearly see that!’

‘There’ll be more,’ hissed Logen, ‘there’re always more! We have to go!’

It had been bad luck, Jezal thought as he lurched back towards the entrance, stumbling down the broken steps and wincing at the pain in his knee. Bad luck that Bayaz had decided to stop, right here and now. Bad luck that Jezal’s leg had been broken and he couldn’t run after that repulsive thing. Bad luck that they had come to Aulcus, instead of being able to cross the river miles downstream.

‘How did they get here?’ Logen was shouting at Bayaz.

‘I can only guess,’ grunted the Magus, wincing and breathing hard. ‘After the Maker’s death we hunted them. We drove them into the dark corners of the world.’

‘There are few corners darker than this one.’ Longfoot hurried past them for the entrance and down the steps, two at a time, and Jezal hopped after him.

‘What is it?’ called Ferro, pulling her bow off her shoulder.

‘Flatheads!’ roared Ninefingers.

She gazed at him blankly and the Northman flapped his free hand at her. ‘Just fucking ride!’

Bad luck. That Jezal had beaten Bremer dan Gorst and been chosen by

Bayaz for this mad journey. Bad luck that he had ever held a fencing steel. Bad luck that his father had wanted him to join the army instead of doing nothing with his life like his two brothers. Strange how that had always seemed like good luck at the time. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.

Jezal stumbled up to his horse, grabbed the saddle-bow and dragged himself clumsily up. Longfoot and Ninefingers were already in their saddles. Bayaz was just shoving his staff back into its place with trembling hands. Somewhere in the city behind them, a bell began to clang.

‘Oh dear,’ said Longfoot, peering wide-eyed through the multitude of statues. ‘Oh dear.’

‘Bad luck,’ whispered Jezal.

Ferro was staring at him. ‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ Jezal gritted his teeth, and gave his horse the spurs.

There was no such thing as luck. Luck was a word idiots used to explain the consequences of their own rashness, and selfishness, and stupidity. More often than not bad luck meant bad plans.

And here was the proof.

She had warned Bayaz that there was something in the city besides her and five pink fools. She had warned him, but no one had listened. People only believe what they want to. Idiots, anyway.

She watched the others, while she rode. Quai, on the seat of the jolting cart, eyes narrowed and fixed ahead. Luthar, with his lips curled back from his teeth, pressed into the saddle in the crouch of a practised rider. Bayaz, jaw clenched tight, face pale and drawn, clinging on grimly. Longfoot, looking often over his shoulder, eyes wide with fear and alarm. Ninefingers, jolting in his saddle, breathing hard, spending more time looking at his reins than at the road. Five idiots, and her.

She heard a growl and saw a creature squatting on a low roof. It was like nothing she had seen before – a bent-over ape, twisted and long-limbed. Apes do not throw spears, however. Her eyes followed it as it arced downwards. It thudded into the side of the cart and stuck there, wobbling, then they were past and clattering on down the rutted street.

That one might have missed, but there were more creatures in the ruins ahead. Ferro could see them moving in the shadowy buildings. Scuttling along the roofs, lurking in the crumbling windows, the gaping doorways. She was tempted to try a shaft at one of them, but what would have been the point? There were a lot of them out there. Hundreds, it felt like. What good would killing one of them do, when they were soon left behind? A waste of an arrow.

A rock crashed down suddenly beside her and she felt a fragment from it whiz past and nick the back of her hand. It left a bead of dark blood on her skin. Ferro frowned and put her head down, keeping herself low to the bouncing back of her horse. There was no such thing as luck.

But there was no point being a bigger target.

Logen thought he'd left the Shanka far behind, but after the first shock of seeing one, it came as no surprise. He should've known by now. Only friends get left behind. Enemies are always at your heels.

The bells were all around them, echoing out of the ruins. Logen's skull was full of their clashing, stabbing through the cracking hooves and the shrieking wheels and the rushing air. Clanging, far away, near at hand, ahead and behind. The buildings rushed by, grey shapes full of danger.

He saw something flash by and bounce spinning from the stones. A spear. He heard another twitter behind, then saw one clatter across the road in front. He swallowed, narrowing his eyes against the wind in his face, and tried not to imagine a spear thudding into his back. It wasn't too difficult. Just holding on was taking all his concentration.

Ferro had turned in her saddle to shout something at him over her shoulder, but her words were lost in the noise. He shook his head at her and she stabbed her arm furiously at the road ahead. Now he saw it. A crevasse opened in the road before them, rushing up at a gallop. Logen's mouth gaped just as wide and he gave a breathless squeak of horror.

He dragged on the reins, and his horse's hooves slipped and skittered on the old stones, turning sharply to the right. The saddle lurched and Logen clung on, cobbles flying by underneath in a grey blur, the edge of the great chasm rushing past no more than a few strides away on his left, cracks from it cutting out into the crumbling road. He could feel the others nearby, could hear voices shouting, but he couldn't hear their words. He was too busy rolling and bouncing painfully in the saddle, willing himself to stay on, all the while whispering.

'Still alive, still alive, still alive . . .'

A temple loomed up towards them, straddling the road, its towering pillars still intact, a monstrous triangular weight of stone still standing on top. The cart crashed between two of the columns and Logen's horse found its way between two others, dipping suddenly into shadow and back out, all of them surging into a wide hall, open to the sky. The crack had swallowed the wall to the left, and if there had ever been a roof it had vanished long ago. Logen rode on, breathless, eyes fixed on a wide archway straight ahead, a square of brightness in the dark stone, bouncing and jolting with the movement of his horse. That was safety, Logen told himself. If they could get through there they were away. If they could only get through there . . .

He didn't see the spear coming, but if he had there would've been nothing he could've done. It was lucky, in a way, that it missed his leg. It thudded deep into horseflesh just in front of it. That was less lucky. He heard the horse snort as its legs buckled, as he came free of the saddle, mouth dropping open and no sound coming out, the floor of the hall flashing up to meet him. Hard stone crunched into his chest and snatched his wind away. His jaw smacked against the ground and his head flooded with blinding light. He bounced once, then flopped over and over, the world spinning crazily around him, full of strange sound and blinding sky. He slid to a stop on his side.

He lay in a daze, groaning softly, his head reeling, his ears ringing, not knowing where he was or even who. Then the world came suddenly back together.

He jerked his head up. The chasm was no more than a spear's length from him, he could hear the water rushing far away in its bottom. He rolled over, away from his horse, trickles of dark blood working their way along the grooves in the stones underneath it. He saw Ferro, down on one knee, pulling arrows from her quiver and shooting them towards the pillars they had ridden between a few moments before.

There were Shanka there, a lot of them.

'Shit,' grunted Logen, scrambling back, the heels of his boots scraping at the dusty stones.

'Come on!' shouted Luthar, sliding down from his saddle, half hopping across the dusty floor. 'Come on!'

A Flathead charged towards them, shrieking, a great axe in its hand. It leaped up suddenly and turned over in the air, one of Ferro's arrows stuck through its face, but there were others. There were a lot more, creeping around the pillars, spears ready to throw.

'Too many!' shouted Bayaz. The old man frowned up at the great columns, the huge weight of stone above them, the muscles of his jaw clenching tight. The air around him began to shimmer.

'Shit.' Logen stumbled like a drunkard across to Ferro, his balance all gone, the hall tipping back and forward around him, the sound of his own heart pounding in his ears. He heard a sharp bang and a crack shot up one of the pillars, a cloud of dust flying out from it. There was a grinding rumble as the stone above began to shift. A couple of the Shanka looked up as fragments rained down on them, pointing and gibbering.

Logen grabbed tight hold of Ferro's wrist. 'Fuck!' she hissed, fumbling an arrow as he half fell and dragged her over, scrambled up and started to pull her after him. A spear zipped past them and clattered across the stones, tumbled off over the edge of the crack into empty space. He could hear the Shanka moving, grunting and growling to each other, starting to swarm between the pillars and into the hall.

'Come on!' shouted Luthar again, taking a couple of limping steps forward and beckoning wildly.

Logen saw Bayaz standing, his lips curled back and his eyes bulging from his skull, the air around him rippling and twisting, the dust on the ground lifting slowly and curling up around his boots. There was an almighty crack and Logen looked over his shoulder to see a great lump of carved stone plummet down from above. It hit the ground with a crash that made the floor shake, crushing an unlucky Shanka to flat nothing before it could even scream, a jagged sword clattering across the ground and a long spatter of dark blood the only signs that it had ever existed. But more were coming, he could see the black shapes of them through the flying dust, charging forward, weapons held high.

One of the pillars split in half. It buckled, moving with ludicrous slowness, pieces of it flying forward into the hall. The vast mass of stone above began to crack apart, tumbling downwards in chunks as big as houses. Logen turned and flung himself on his face and dragged Ferro down with him, grovelling on the ground, squeezing his eyes shut, throwing his hands over his head.

There was a giant crashing, tearing, splitting such as Logen had never heard

in all his life. A roaring and groaning of tortured earth as though the world was falling in. Perhaps it was. The ground bucked and trembled underneath him. There was another deafening crash, a long clattering and scraping, a gentle clicking, then something close to quiet.

Logen unclenched his aching jaw and opened his eyes. The air was full of stinging dust, but it felt as if he was lying on some kind of slope. He coughed and tried to move. There was a sharp grinding sound beneath his chest and the stone underneath him began to shift, the slope getting steeper. He gasped and pressed himself back flat against it, clinging to it with his fingertips. He still had his hand clenched round Ferro's arm, and he felt her fingers squeeze tight into his wrist. He turned his head slowly to look around him, and froze.

The pillars were gone. The hall was gone. The floor was gone. The vast crack had swallowed them all up, and now yawned underneath him. Angry water slapped and hissed at the shattered ruins far below. Logen gaped, hardly able to believe his eyes. He was lying sideways on a huge slab of stone, until a moment ago part of the floor of the hall, now teetering at an angle on the very edge of a plunging cliff.

Ferro's dark fingers were clamped round his wrist, her ripped sleeve gathered up round her elbow, sinews standing out stark from her brown forearm with the effort. Beyond that he could see her shoulder, beyond that her rigid face. The rest of her was invisible – dangling over the edge of the slab and into the yawning air.

'Ssss,' she hissed, yellow eyes wide, fingers scrabbling desperately for a hand hold on the smooth slope. A chunk of stone cracked suddenly from the ragged edge and Logen heard it fall, pinging and bouncing from the ruptured earth.

'Shit,' he whispered, hardly daring even to breathe. What the hell were the chances of this? Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he has poor luck.

He crawled his free hand up the pitted stone until he found a shallow ridge to cling to. He lifted himself inch by inch towards the edge of the block above. He flexed his arm and started to drag at Ferro's wrist.

There was a horrifying scraping and the stone underneath him jolted and tipped slowly upwards. He whimpered and pressed himself back against it, willing it to stop. There was a sickening jolt and some dust filtered down into his face. Stone squealed as the block swung ever so slowly back the other way. He lay there, gasping. No way up, no way down.

'Ssss!' Ferro's eyes flicked to their hands, gripped tight round each other's wrists. She jerked her head up towards the edge of the block, then down towards the gaping crack behind.

'Have to be realistic,' she whispered. Her fingers uncurled, letting him go.

Logen remembered hanging from a building, far above a circle of yellow grass. He remembered sliding back, whispering for help. He remembered Ferro's hand closing round his, pulling him up. He slowly shook his head, and gripped her wrist tighter than ever.

She rolled her yellow eyes at him. 'Stupid fucking pink!'

Jezal coughed, turned over, and spat out dust. He blinked around him. Something was different. It seemed much brighter than it had been, and the edge of the crack was much nearer. Not far away at all, in fact.

'Uh,' he breathed, words failing him. Half the building had collapsed. The rear wall was still standing, and one of the pillars at the far end, broken off halfway up. All the rest was gone, vanished into the yawning chasm. He staggered up, wincing as his weight went onto his bad leg. He saw Bayaz lying propped against the wall nearby.

The Magus' withered face was streaked with sweat, bright eyes glittering in black circles, bones of his face poking through stretched skin. He looked like nothing so much as a week-old corpse. It was a surprise to see him move at all, but Jezal watched him raise one palsied hand to point towards the crack. 'Get them,' he croaked.

The others.

'Over here!' Ninefingers' voice came strangled-sounding from beyond the edge of the crevasse. So he was alive, at least. One great slab was sticking up at an angle and Jezal shuffled gingerly towards it, worried that the floor might suddenly give way beneath him. He peered over into the chasm.

The Northman was lying spread out on his front, left hand up near the top edge of the tilting block, right fist near the bottom clutched tight round Ferro's wrist. Her body was out of sight, her scarred face just visible. They both looked equally horrified. Several tons of stone, rocking, ever so gently, balanced on the finest of margins. It was plain that it might easily slide into the abyss at any moment.

'Do something . . .' whispered Ferro, not even daring to raise her voice. Jezal noticed that she did not suggest any specifics, however.

He licked at the slot in his lip. Perhaps if he were to put his weight on this end it would tilt back level and they could simply crawl off? Could it possibly be so straightforward? He reached out carefully, thumbs rubbing nervously against fingertips, all suddenly weak and sweaty-feeling. He laid his hand gently on the ragged edge while Ninefingers and Ferro stared, holding their breath.

He applied the very slightest pressure, and the slab began to swing smoothly downwards. He put a little more weight on it. There was a loud grating sound and the whole block gave a horrifying lurch.

'Don't fucking push it!' screamed Ninefingers, clinging to the smooth rock with his fingernails.

'What then?' squealed Jezal.

'Get something!'

'Get anything!' hissed Ferro.

Jezal stared around wildly, saw no source of help. Of Longfoot and Quai there was no sign. Either they were dead somewhere at the bottom of the chasm, or they had made a timely bid for freedom. Neither one would have much surprised him. If anyone was going to be saved, Jezal would have to do it by himself.

He dragged his coat off, started to twist it round to make a kind of rope. He weighed it in his hand, shaking his head. Surely this would never work, but what were the choices? He stretched it out, then swung one end over. It

slapped against the stone a few inches short of Logen's clutching fingers, sending up a puff of grit.

'Alright, alright, try again!'

Jezal lifted the coat up high, leaning out over the slab as far as he dared, and swung it down again. The arm flopped out just far enough for Logen to seize hold of.

'Yes!' He wound it round his wrist, the material dragging out tight over the edge of the slab.

'Yes! Now pull it!'

Jezal gritted his teeth and hauled, his boots slipping in the dust, his sore arm and his sore leg aching with the effort. The coat came towards him, slowly, slowly, sliding over the stone, inch by torturous inch.

'Yes!' grunted Ninefingers working his shoulders up the slab.

'Pull it!' growled Ferro, wriggling her hips up over the edge and onto the slope.

Jezal hauled for all he was worth, eyes squeezed almost shut, breath hissing between his teeth. A spear clattered down beside him and he looked up to see a score or more Flatheads gathered on the far side of the great crack, waving their misshapen arms. He swallowed and looked away from them. He could not allow himself to think of the danger. All that mattered was to pull. To pull and pull and not let go, however much it hurt. And it was working. Slowly, slowly, they were coming up. Jezal dan Luthar, the hero at last. He would finally have earned his place on this cursed expedition.

There was a sharp ripping sound. 'Shit,' squeaked Logen. 'Shit!' The sleeve was coming slowly away from the body of the coat, the stitches stretching, ripping, coming undone. Jezal whimpered with horror, his hands burning. Should he pull or not? Another stitch pinged open. How hard to pull? One more stitch went.

'What do I do?' he squealed.

'Pull, you fucker!'

Jezal dragged at the coat as hard as he could, muscles burning. Ferro was up on the stone, scrabbling at the smooth surface with her nails. Logen's clutching hand was almost at the edge, almost there, his three fingers stretching, stretching out for it. Jezal hauled again—

And he stumbled backwards, holding nothing but a limp rag. The slab shuddered, and groaned, and tipped up. There was a squawk, and Logen slid away, the ripped-off sleeve flapping useless in his hand. There were no screams. Just a clatter of tumbling stones, then nothing. They both were gone, over the edge. The great slab rocked slowly back and lay there, flat and empty, at the edge of the crack. Jezal stood and stared, his mouth open, the sleeveless coat still dangling from his throbbing hand.

'No,' he whispered. That was not how it happened in the stories.

Beneath the Ruins

‘You alive, pink?’ Logen groaned as he shifted his weight, felt a lurch of horror as stones moved underneath him. Then he realised he was lying in a heap of rubble, the corner of a slab digging hard into a sore spot in his back. He saw a stone wall, blurry, a hard line across it between light and shadow. He blinked, wincing, pain creeping up his arm as he tried to rub the dust out of his eyes.

Ferro was kneeling just beside him, her dark face streaked with blood from a cut on her forehead, her black hair full of brown dust. Behind her a wide vaulted chamber stretched into the shadows. The ceiling was broken away above her head, a ragged line with the pale blue sky beyond it. Logen turned his head painfully, baffled. No more than a stride from him the stone slabs he was lying on were sheared off, jutting out into the empty air. A long way away he could see the far side of the crack, a cliff of crumbling rock and earth, the outlines of half-fallen buildings jutting from the top.

He began to understand. They were underneath the floor of the temple. When the crack opened up it must have torn this place open, leaving just enough of a ledge for them to fall onto. Them and a lot of broken rock. They couldn’t have fallen far. He almost felt himself grinning. He was still alive.

‘What ab—’

Ferro’s hand slapped down hard over his mouth, her nose not a foot from his. ‘Ssss,’ she hissed softly, yellow eyes rolling upward, one long finger pointing towards the vaulted ceiling.

Logen felt his skin go prickling cold. He heard them now. Shanka. Scuffling and clattering, gibbering and squeaking to each other, up above their heads. He nodded, and slowly Ferro lifted her dirty hand away from his face.

He eased himself up out of the rubble, slow and stiff, trying to stay as quiet as possible, wincing all the while at the effort, dust running off his coat as he came up to his feet. He tested his limbs, waiting for the searing pain that would tell him he had broken his shoulder, or his leg, or his skull.

His coat was ripped and his elbow was skinned and throbbing, streaks of blood all down his forearm to his fingertips. When he put his fingers to his aching head he felt blood there, and underneath his jaw, where he cracked it on the ground. His mouth was salty with it. Must have bitten his tongue, yet again. It was a wonder the damn thing was still attached. One knee was painful, his neck was stiff, his ribs were a mass of bruises, but everything still moved. If he forced it to.

There was something wrapped round his hand. The torn sleeve of Luthar’s coat. He shook it off and let it drop in the rubble beside him. No use now. Not much use then. Ferro was at the far end of the hall, peering into an archway. Logen shambled up beside her, doing his grimacing best to keep silent.

‘What about the others?’ he whispered. Ferro shrugged her shoulders. ‘Maybe they got away?’ he tried, hopefully. Ferro gave him a long, slow look,

one black eyebrow raised, and Logen winced and squeezed his aching arm. She was right. The two of them were alive, for now. That was about as much luck as they could hope for, and it might be a while before they got any more.

'This way,' whispered Ferro, pointing into the darkness.

Logen peered into that black opening and his heart sank. He hated being underground. All that weight of stone and earth, pressing above, ready to fall. And they had no torch. Inky black, with hardly air to breathe, no notion of how far to go, or in what direction. He peered up nervously towards the vaulted stones above his head, and swallowed. Tunnels were places for Shanka or for the dead. Logen was neither one, and he didn't much fancy meeting either down there. 'You sure?'

'What, scared of the dark?'

'I'd rather be able to see, if I had the choice.'

'You see any choices?' sneered Ferro at him. 'You can stay here, if you want. Maybe another pack of idiots will come wandering through in a hundred years. You'll fit right in!'

Logen nodded, sucking sourly at his bloody gums. It seemed like a long time since the two of them had last been in a fix like this one, sliding across the dizzy rooftops of the Agriont, hunted by men in black masks. It seemed a long, hard time, but nothing much had changed. For all their riding together, and eating together, and facing death together, Ferro was still as bitter, and as angry, and as sore a pain in his arse as she had been when they first set out. He tried to be patient, really he did, but it was getting to be tiring.

'Do you have to?' he muttered, looking her right in one yellow eye.

'Have to what?'

'Be a cunt. Do you have to?'

She frowned at him for a moment, opened her mouth, paused, then shrugged her shoulders. 'You should have let me fall.'

'Eh?' He'd been expecting some furious insult from her. Some stabbing at him with a finger, certainly, and possibly with a blade. That had sounded almost like regret. But if it had been, it didn't last long.

'You should have let me fall, then I'd be on my own down here without you to get in my way!'

Logen snorted with disgust. There was no helping some people. 'Let go of you? Don't worry! Next time I will!'

'Good!' spat Ferro, stalking off into the tunnel, shadows quickly swallowing her. Logen felt a sudden stab of panic at the idea of being left alone.

'Wait!' he hissed, and hurried after.

The passageway sloped downwards, Ferro's feet padding noiseless, Logen's scraping in the dust, the last shreds of light gleaming on wet stone. He kept the fingertips of his left hand trailing along the wall, trying not to groan with each step at the pain in his bruised ribs, and his torn elbow, and his bloody jaw.

It grew darker, and darker yet. The walls and the floor became nothing but hints, then nothing at all. Ferro's dirty shirt was a grey ghost, hovering in the dead air before him. A few weak-kneed steps further and it was gone. He waved his hand in front of his face. Not so much as a trace. Just inky, fizzing blackness.

He was buried. Buried in the darkness, alone. 'Ferro, wait!'

'What?' He blundered into her in the dark, felt something shove him in the chest and nearly fell over backwards, staggering against the damp wall. 'What the hell—'

'I can't see anything!' he hissed, hearing his own voice full of panic. 'I can't . . . where are you?' He flailed at the air with his open hands, all sense of direction gone, his heart pounding, his stomach sick and heaving. What if she'd left him down there, the evil bitch? What if—

'Here.' He felt her hand catch hold of his and close round it, cool and reassuring. He heard her voice not far from his ear. 'You think you can follow me without falling on your face, fool?'

'I . . . I think so.'

'Just try to keep quiet!' And he felt her move off, pulling him impatiently after her.

If only the old crew could've seen him now. Logen Ninefingers, the most feared man in the North, piss-wet frightened of the dark, clinging tight to the hand of a woman who hated him, like a child clinging to his mother's tit. He might almost have laughed out loud. But he was scared the Shanka would hear.

Ninefingers' big paw felt hot, clammy with fear. An unpleasant sensation, his sticky skin pressed tight against hers. Sickening, almost, but Ferro made herself hold on. She could hear his breathing, quick and snatched in the tight space, his clumsy footsteps stumbling after her.

It felt like only yesterday that the two of them were last in a fix like this one, hurtling down the lanes of the Agriont, sneaking through its darkened buildings, chased all the way. It felt like yesterday, but everything had changed.

Back then, he had seemed nothing but a threat. One more pink that she would have to keep her eye on. Ugly and strange, stupid and dangerous. Back then, he might easily have been the last man in the world she would have trusted. Now he might easily have been the only one. He had not let her fall, even though she had told him to. He had chosen to fall with her rather than let her go. Out there on the plain, he had said he would stick if she did.

Now he had proved it.

She looked over her shoulder, saw his pale face gawping in the dark, eyes wide but unseeing, free hand stretched out and feeling for the walls. She should have thanked him, maybe, for not letting her fall, but that would have been as good as admitting she needed the help. Help was for the weak, and the weak die, or are made slaves. Never hope for help and you can never be disappointed when it does not come. And Ferro had been disappointed often.

So instead of thanking him she dragged at his hand and nearly made him fall.

A glimmer of cold light was starting to creep back into the tunnel, the slightest glow at the edges of the rough stone blocks. 'Can you see now?' she hissed over her shoulder.

'Yes.' She could hear the relief in his voice.

'Then you can let go,' she snapped, snatching her hand away and wiping it on the front of her shirt. She pressed on through the half-light, working her fingers and frowning down at them. It was an odd feeling.

Now that his hand was gone she almost missed it.

The light was growing brighter now, leaking into the passage from a narrow archway up ahead. She crept towards it, padding on the balls of her feet and peered round the corner. A great cavern opened out below them, its walls partly of smooth carved blocks, partly of natural stone, soaring up and bulging out in strange, melted formations, its ceiling lost in shadows. A shaft of light came down from high above, casting a long patch of brightness on the dusty stone floor. Three Shanka were gathered there in a clump, muttering and scratching over something on the floor, and all around them, piled in great heaps, as high as a man and higher to the very walls of the cave, were thousands, upon thousands, upon thousands, of bones.

'Shit,' breathed Logen, from just behind her. A skull grinned up at them from the corner of the arch. Human bones, without a doubt.

'They eat the dead,' she whispered.

'They what? But—'

'Nothing rots.' Bayaz had said the city was full of graves. Countless corpses, flung in pits for a hundred each. And there they must have lain down the long years, tangled up together in a cold embrace.

Until the Shanka came and dragged them out.

'We'll have to get around them,' whispered Ninefingers.

Ferro stared into the shadows, looking for a route into the cavern. There was no way to climb down that hill of bones without making noise. She shrugged her bow off her shoulder.

'You sure?' asked Ninefingers, touching her on the elbow.

She nudged him back. 'Give me some room, pink.' She would have to work quickly. She wiped the blood out of her eyebrow. She slid three arrows out of her quiver and between the fingers of her right hand, where she could get at them fast. She took a fourth in her left and levelled her bow, drawing back the string, aiming at the furthest Flathead. When the arrow struck it through the body she was already aiming at the second. It took the shaft in the shoulder and fell down with a strange squawk just as the last one was turning. Her arrow caught it clean through its neck before it got all the way round and it pitched on its face. Ferro nocked the last arrow, waiting. The second Flathead tried to scramble up, but it had not got half a stride before she nailed it through the back and sent it sprawling.

She lowered the bow, frowning towards the Shanka. None of them moved.

'Shit,' breathed Logen. 'Bayaz is right. You are a devil.'

'Was right,' grunted Ferro. The chances were good that those creatures had him by now, and it was abundantly clear that they ate men. Luthar, and Longfoot, and Quai as well, she guessed. A shame.

But not a big one.

She shouldered her bow and crept cautiously into the cavern, keeping low, her boot crunching down in the hill of bones. She wobbled out further, arms spread wide for balance, half-walking, half-wading, up to her knees in places, bones cracking and scraping around her legs. She made it down onto the

cavern floor and knelt there, staring round and licking her lips.

Nothing moved. The three Shanka lay still, dark blood pooling on the stone underneath their bodies.

'Gah!' Ninefingers tumbled down the slope, clattering splinters flying up around him, rolling over and over. He crashed down on his face in the midst of a rattling slide of bones and scrambled up. 'Shit! Ugh!' He shook half a dusty rib-cage off his arm and flung it away.

'Quiet, fool!' hissed Ferro, dragging him down beside her, staring across the cavern towards a rough archway in the far wall, expecting hordes of those things to come pouring in at any moment, keen to add their bones to the rest. But nothing came. She gave him a dark look but he was too busy nursing his bruises, so she left him be and crept over to the three corpses.

They had been gathered round a leg. A woman's leg, Ferro guessed, from the lack of hair on it. A stub of bone poked out of dry, withered flesh round the severed thigh. One of them had been going at it with a knife and it still lay nearby, the bright blade shining in the shaft of light from high above. Ninefingers stooped and picked it up.

'You can never have too many knives.'

'No? What if you fall in a river and can't swim for all that iron?'

He looked puzzled for a moment, then he shrugged and put it carefully back down on the ground. 'Fair point.'

She slipped her own blade out from her belt. 'One knife will do well enough. If you know where to stick it.' She dug the blade into one of the Flatheads' backs and started to cut out her arrow. 'What are these things anyway?' She worked the shaft out, intact, and rolled the Flathead over with her boot. It stared up at her, piggy black eyes unseeing under a low, flat forehead, lips curled back from a wide maw full of bloody teeth. 'They're even uglier than you, pink.'

'Very good. They're Shanka. Flatheads. Kanedias made them.'

'Made them?' The next arrow snapped off as she tried to twist it out.

'So Bayaz said. As a weapon, to use in a war.'

'I thought he died.'

'Seems his weapons lived on.'

The one she shot through the neck had fallen on the shaft and broken it near the head. Useless, now. 'How does a man make one of these things?'

'You think I've got the answers? They'd come across the sea, every summer, when the ice melted, and there'd always be work fighting 'em. Lots of work.' She hacked out the last shaft, bloody but sound. 'When I was young they started coming more and more often. My father sent me south, over the mountains, to get help with the fighting of 'em . . .' He trailed off. 'Well. That's a long story. The High Valleys are swarming with Flatheads now.'

'It hardly matters,' she grunted, standing up and sliding the two good arrows carefully back into her quiver, 'as long as they die.'

'Oh, they die. Trouble is there's always more to kill.' He was frowning down at the three dead things, frowning down hard with a cold look in his eye. 'There's nothing left now, north of the mountains. Nothing and no one.'

Ferro did not much care about that. 'We need to move.'

'All back to the mud,' he growled, as though she had not spoken, his frown

growing harder all the time.

She stepped up in front of his face. 'You hear me? We need to move, I said.'

'Eh?' He blinked at her for a moment, then he scowled. The muscles round his jaw tightened rigid under his skin, the scars stretching and shifting, face tipped forward, eyes lost in hard shadow from the light overhead. 'Alright. We move.'

Ferro frowned at him as a trickle of blood crept down from his hair and across the greasy, stubbly side of his face. He no longer looked like anyone she would trust.

'Not planning to go strange on me, are you, pink? I need you to stay cold.'

'I am cold,' he whispered.

Logen was hot. His skin prickled under his dirty clothes. He felt strange, dizzy, his head full of the stink of Shanka. He could hardly breathe for their smell. The hallway seemed to move under his feet, shifting before his eyes. He winced and hunched over, sweat running down his face, dripping onto the tipping stone below.

Ferro whispered something at him, but he couldn't make sense of the words – they echoed from the walls and round his face, but wouldn't go in. He nodded and flapped one hand at her, struggled on behind. The hallway was growing hotter and hotter, the blurry stone had taken on an orange glow. He blundered into Ferro's back and nearly fell, crawled forwards on his sore knees, gasping hard.

There was a huge cavern beyond. Four slender columns rose up in the centre, up and up into the shifting darkness far above. Beneath them fires burned. Many fires, printing white images into Logen's stinging eyes. Coals crackled and cracked and spat out smoke. Sparks came up in stinging showers, steam came up in hissing gouts. Globes of melted iron dripped from crucibles, splattering the ground with glowing embers. Molten metal ran through channels in the floor, striking lines of red and yellow and searing white into the black stone.

The yawning space was full of Shanka, ragged shapes moving through the boiling darkness. They worked at the fires, and the bellows, and the crucibles like men, a score of them, or more. There was a furious din. Hammers clanged, anvils rang, metal clattered, Flatheads squawked and shrieked to each other. Racks stood against the distant walls, dark racks stacked with bright weapons, steel glittering in all the colours of fire and fury.

Logen blinked and stared, head pounding, arm throbbing, the heat pressing onto his face, wondering if he could believe his eyes. Perhaps they had walked into the forge of hell. Perhaps Glustrod had opened a gate beneath the city after all. A gate to the Other Side, and they had passed through it without ever guessing.

He was breathing fast, in ragged gasps, and couldn't make them slow, and every breath he took was full of the sting of smoke and the stink of Shanka. His eyes were bulging, his throat was burning, he could not swallow. He wasn't sure when he had drawn the Maker's sword, but now the orange light flashed and flickered on the bare dark metal, his right hand bunched into a fist

around the grip, painful tight. He couldn't make the fingers open. He stared at them, glowing orange and black, pulsing as if they were on fire, veins and tendons starting from the taut skin, knuckles pale with furious pressure.

Not his hand.

'We'll have to go back,' Ferro was saying, pulling at his arm, 'find another way.'

'No.' The voice was harsh as a hammer falling, rough as a whetstone turning, sharp as a drawn blade in his throat.

Not his voice.

'Get behind me,' he managed to whisper, grabbing hold of Ferro's shoulder and dragging himself past her.

There could be no going back now . . .

. . . and he could smell them. He tipped his head up and sucked in hot air through his nose. His head was full of the reek of them and that was good. Hatred was a powerful weapon, in the right hands. The Bloody-Nine hated everything. But his oldest-buried, and his deepest-rooted, and his hottest-burning hatred, that was for the Shanka.

He slid into the cavern, a shadow between the fires, the noise of angry steel echoing around him. A beautiful and familiar song. He swam in it, revelled in it, drank it in. He felt the heavy blade in his hand, power flowing from the cold metal into his hot flesh, from his hot flesh into the cold metal, building and swelling and growing in waves with his surging breath.

The Flatheads had not seen him yet. They were working. Busy with their meaningless tasks. They could not have expected vengeance to find them where they lived, and breathed, and toiled, but they would learn.

The Bloody-Nine loomed up behind one, lifting the Maker's sword high. He smiled as he watched the long shadow stretch out across the bald skull – a promise, soon to be fulfilled. The long blade whispered its secret and the Shanka split apart, clean down the middle like a flower opening, blood spraying out warm and comforting, spattering the anvil, and the stone floor, and the Bloody-Nine's face with wet little gifts.

Another saw him now and he came for it, faster and angrier than the boiling steam. It lifted an arm, lurching backwards. Not nearly far enough. The Maker's sword sheared through its elbow, the severed forearm spinning over and over in the air. Before it hit the ground the Bloody-Nine had struck the Shanka's head off on the backswing. Blood sizzled on molten iron, glowed orange on the dull metal of the blade, on the pale skin of his hand, on the harsh stone under his feet, and he beckoned to the others.

'Come,' he whispered. They all were welcome.

They scattered for the racks, seizing their spiked swords, and their sharp axes, and the Bloody-Nine laughed to watch them. Armed or not, their death was a thing already decided. It was written into the cavern in lines of fire and lines of shadow. Now he would write it in lines of blood. They were animals, and less than animals. Their weapons stabbed and cut at him, but the Bloody-Nine was made of fire and darkness and he drifted and slithered between their crude blows, around their fumbling spears, under and over their worthless

screams and their useless fury.

Easier to stab the flickering flame. Easier to cut the shifting shadows. Their weakness was an insult to his strength.

'Die!' he roared, and the blade made circles, savage and beautiful, the letter on the metal burning red and leaving bright trails behind. And where the circles passed everything would be made right. The Shanka would scream and gibber, and the pieces of them would scatter, and they would be sliced and divided as neatly as meat on the butcher's block, as dough on the baker's block, as the corn stubble left by the farmer's scythe, all according to a perfect design.

The Bloody-Nine showed his teeth, and smiled to be free, and to see the good work done so well. He saw the flash of a blade and jerked away, felt it leave him a lingering kiss across his side. He knocked a barbed sword from a Flathead's hand, seized it by the scruff of the neck and forced its face down into the channel where the molten steel flowed, furious yellow, and its head hissed and bubbled, shooting out stinking steam.

'Burn!' laughed the Bloody-Nine, and the ruined corpses, and their gaping wounds, and their fallen weapons, and the boiling bright iron laughed with him.

Only the Shanka did not laugh. They knew their hour was come.

The Bloody-Nine watched one jump, springing over an anvil, a club raised to crush his skull. Before he could slash it from the air an arrow slipped into its open mouth and snatched it backwards, dead as mud. The Bloody-Nine frowned. He saw other arrows now, among the corpses. Someone else was spoiling his good work. He would make them pay, later, but something was coming at him from between the four columns.

It was cased all in bright armour sealed with heavy rivets, a round helmet clamped over the top half of its skull, eyes glinting beyond a thin slot. It grunted and snorted, sounds loud as a bull, iron-booted feet thudding on the stone as it thundered forwards, a massive axe in its iron-gloved fists. A giant among Shanka. Or some new thing, made from iron and flesh, down here in the darkness.

Its axe curved in a shining arc and the Bloody-Nine rolled away from it, the heavy blade crashing into the ground and sending out a shower of fragments. It roared at him again, maw opening wide under its slotted visor, a cloud of spit hissing from its hanging mouth. The Bloody-Nine faded back, shifting and dancing with the shifting shadows and the dancing flames.

He fell away, and away, and he let the blows miss him on one side and the other, miss him above his head and beneath his feet. Let them clang into the metal and the stone around him and fill the air with a fury of dust and splinters. He fell back, until the creature began to tire under all that weight of iron.

The Bloody-Nine saw it stumble, and he felt the touch of his moment upon him, and he surged forward, raising the sword above his head, opening his mouth and making a scream that pressed on his arm, and his hand, and the blade and the very walls of the cavern. The great Shanka brought the shaft of its axe up in both fists to block the blow. Good bright steel, born in these hot fires, hard and strong and tough as the Flatheads could forge it.

But the work of the Master Maker would not be denied. The dull blade cleaved through the shaft with a sound like a child screaming and scored a gash a hand deep through the Shanka's heavy armour from its neck down to its groin. Blood splattered out onto the bright metal, onto the dark stone. The Bloody-Nine laughed and dug his fist into the wound, ripping out a handful of the Shanka's guts as it toppled away and crashed onto its back, the neatly severed halves of its axe clattering from its twitching claws.

He smiled upon the others. They lurked there, three of them, weapons in hand, but they would not come on. They lurked in the shadows, but the darkness was no friend to them. It belonged to him, and him alone. The Bloody-Nine took a step forward, and one more, sword hanging from one hand, a length of bloody gut from the other, winding slowly from the slaughtered Flathead's corpse. The creatures shuffled back before him, squeaking and clicking to each other, and the Bloody-Nine laughed in their faces.

The Shanka might be ever so full of mad fury, but even they had to fear him. Everything did. Even the dead, who felt no pain. Even the cold stone, which did not dream. Even the molten iron feared the Bloody-Nine. Even the darkness.

He roared and sprang forward, flinging his handful of entrails away. The point of his sword raked across a Shanka's chest and spun it round, squealing. A moment later and the blade thudded into its shoulder and split it to its breastbone.

The last two turned to run, scrambling across the stone, but fight or run, where was the difference? Another arrow slid into the back of one before it got three strides and it sprawled on its face. The Bloody-Nine darted out and his fingers closed round the ankle of the last, tight as a vice, dragging it towards him, its claws scrabbling at the soot-caked stone.

His fist was the hammer, the floor was the anvil, and the Shanka's head was the metal to be worked. One blow and its nose split open, broken teeth falling. Two and he smashed its cheek-bone in. Three and its jaw burst apart under his knuckles. His fist was made of stone, of steel, of adamant. It was heavy as a falling mountain and blow after blow it crushed the Shanka's thick skull to formless mush.

'Flat . . . head,' hissed the Bloody-Nine, and he laughed, hauling up the ruined body and flinging it away, turning in the air, to crash down into the broken racks. He reeled around, weaving across the chamber, the Maker's sword dangling from his hand, the point striking sparks from the stone as it clattered after him. He glared into the darkness, turning and shifting, but only the fires moved, and the shadows moving around them. The chamber was empty.

'No!' he snarled. 'Where are you?' His legs were weak, they would hardly hold him up any longer. 'Where are you, you fuckers . . .' He stumbled and fell on one knee on the hot stone, gasping in air. There had to be more work. The Bloody-Nine could never do enough. But his strength was fickle, and now it was flowing out of him.

He saw something move, blinked at it. A streak of darkness, sliding slow and quiet between the pulsing fires and the tipping bodies. Not a Shanka.

Some other kind of enemy. More subtle and more dangerous. Sooty dark skin in the shade, soft steps padding around the smears of blood his work had left. She had a bow in her hard hands, string pulled back halfway and the bright head of the arrow glinting sharp. Her yellow eyes shone like melted metal, like hot gold, mocking him. 'You safe, pink?' Her voice boomed and whispered in his ringing skull. 'I don't want to kill you, but I will.'

Threats? 'Cunt bitch,' he hissed at her, but his lips were stupid clumsy and nothing came out but a long dribble of spit. He wobbled forward, leaning on the sword, straining to get up, fury burning in him hotter than ever. She would learn. The Bloody-Nine would give her such a lesson that she would never need another. He would cut her in pieces, and grind the pieces under his heels. If he could just get up . . .

He swayed, blinking, breath rasping in and out, slow, slow. The flames dimmed and guttered, the shadows lengthened, blurred, swallowed him up and pushed him down.

One more, just one more. Always one more . . .

But his time was up . . .

. . . Logen coughed, and trembled, shivering weak. His hands took shape in the murk, curled into fists on the dirty stone, bloody as a careless slaughterman's. He guessed what must have happened, and he groaned and felt tears stinging his eyes. Ferro's scarred face loomed at him out of the hot darkness. So he hadn't killed her, at least.

'You hurt?'

He couldn't answer. He didn't know. It felt like there might be a cut on his side, but there was so much blood it was hard to tell. He tried to stand, lurched against an anvil and nearly put his hand in a glowing furnace. He blinked and spat, knees trembling. Searing fires swam before his eyes. There were corpses everywhere, sprawled out shapes on the sooty ground. He looked around, dull-witted, for something to wipe his hands on, but everything was spattered with gore. His stomach heaved, and he stumbled on wobbly legs between the forges towards an archway in the far wall, one bloody hand clamped to his mouth.

He leaned there, against the warm stone, dribbling sour blood and spit onto the ground, pain licking at his side, at his face, at his torn knuckles. But if he'd been hoping for pity, he'd chosen the wrong companion.

'Let's go,' snapped Ferro. 'Come on, pink, up.'

He couldn't have said how long he shambled through the darkness, gasping after Ferro's heels, the sound of his own breath echoing in his skull. They crept through the guts of the earth. Through ancient halls filled with dust and shadows, stone walls riddled with cracks. Through archways into winding tunnels, ceilings of mud propped with rickety beams.

Once they came to a junction and Ferro pressed him back into the darkness by the wall, both of them holding their breath as ragged shapes scraped and shuffled down a hallway that crossed theirs. On and on – corridor, cavern, burrow. He could only follow, dragging after her until he knew he would fall on his face at any moment from simple tiredness. Until he was sure that he

would never see daylight again . . .

‘Wait,’ hissed Ferro, putting her hand against his chest to stop him and nearly pushing him over his legs were so weak. A sluggish stream joined the hallway, slow-moving water flapping and rippling in the shadows. Ferro knelt down beside it, peering into the dark tunnel it flowed out of.

‘If it joins the river downstream, it must come from outside the city.’

Logen was not so sure. ‘What if it . . . comes up from . . . underground?’

‘Then we find another way. Or we drown.’ Ferro shouldered her bow and slid in, up to her chest, her thin lips pressed tight together. Logen watched her wade out, arms held up above the dark water. Did she never tire? He was so sore and weary he wanted only to lie down and never get up. For a moment he considered doing it. Then Ferro turned and saw him squatting on the bank. ‘Come on, pink!’ she hissed at him.

Logen sighed. There was never any changing her mind. He heaved one reluctant, trembling leg into the cold water. ‘Right behind you,’ he muttered. ‘Right behind.’

No Good for Each Other

Ferro waded on against the current, up to her waist in fastflowing water, teeth gritted against the gripping cold, Ninefingers sloshing and gasping behind her. She could just see an archway up ahead, faint light from beyond glinting on the water. It was blocked with iron bars, but as she forced her way close she could see they were rusted through, thin and flaking. She pressed herself up against them. Beyond she could see the stream flowing down towards her between banks of rock and bare mud. Above was the evening sky, stars just starting to show themselves.

Freedom.

Ferro fumbled at the old iron, air hissing between her teeth, fingers slow and weak from the cold. Ninefingers came up beside her and planted his hands next to hers – four hands in a row, two dark and two pale, clamped tight and straining. They were pressed against each other in the narrow space and she heard him grunting with effort, heard the rushing of her own breath, felt the ancient metal beginning to bend, squealing softly.

Far enough for her to slither between.

She pushed her bow, and quiver, and sword through first, holding them up in one hand. She hooked her head between the bars, turning sideways, sucking in her stomach and holding her breath, wriggling her shoulders, then her chest, then her hips through the narrow gap, feeling the rough metal scraping at her skin through her wet clothes.

She dragged herself onto the other side, tossing her weapons onto the bank. She braced her shoulders in the archway and planted her boots against the next bar, every muscle straining while Ninefingers dragged on it from the other side. It gave all of a sudden, snapping in half and showering flakes of rust into the stream, dumping her on her back, over her head in the freezing water.

Ninefingers started to haul himself through, face twisted with effort. Ferro floundered up, gasping with the cold, grabbed him under the arms and started pulling, felt his hands grip round her back. She grunted and wrestled and finally dragged him out. They flopped together onto the muddy bank and lay there, side by side. Ferro stared up at the crumbling walls of the ruined city rising sheer above her in the grey dusk, breathing hard and listening to Ninefingers do the same. She had not expected to get out of that place alive.

But they were not away quite yet.

She rolled and clambered up, dripping wet and trying to stop herself shivering. She wondered if she had ever been so cold in her whole life.

‘That’s it,’ she heard Ninefingers muttering. ‘By the fucking dead, that’s it. I’m done. I’m not moving another stride.’

Ferro shook her head. ‘We need to make some distance while we still have light.’ She snatched up her weapons from the dirt.

'You call this light? Are you fucking crazy, woman?'

'You know I am. Let's go, pink.' And she poked him in the ribs with her wet boot.

'Alright, damn it! Alright!' He stumbled reluctantly up, swaying, and she turned, started to walk up the bank through the twilight, away from the walls.

'What did I do?' She turned and looked at him, standing there, wet hair dripping round his face. 'What did I do, back there?'

'You got us through.'

'I meant—'

'You got us through. That's all.' And she slogged off up the bank. After a moment she heard Ninefingers following.

It was so dark, and Logen was so tired, that he barely even saw the ruin until they were almost inside it. It must have been a mill, he reckoned. It was built out right next to the stream, though he guessed the wheel had been missing for a few hundred years or more.

'We'll stop here,' hissed Ferro, ducking through the crumbling doorway. Logen was too tired to do anything but nod and shamble after her. Thin moonlight washed down into the empty shell, picking out the edges of stones, the shapes of old windows, the hard-packed dirt of the ground. He stumbled to the nearest wall and sagged against it, sliding slowly down until his arse hit the mud.

'Still alive,' he mouthed silently, and grinned to himself. A hundred cuts and scrapes and bruises clamoured for attention, but he was still alive. He sat motionless – damp and aching and utterly spent, let his eyes close, and enjoyed the feeling of not having to move.

He frowned. There was a strange sound in the darkness, over the trickling of the stream. A tapping, clicking sound. It took him a moment to realise what it was. Ferro's teeth. He dragged his coat off, wincing as he pulled it over his torn elbow, and held it out to her in the dark.

'What's this?'

'A coat.'

'I see it's a coat. What for?'

Damn it but she was stubborn. Logen almost laughed out loud. 'I may not have your eyes, but I can still hear your teeth rattling.' He held the coat out again. 'Wish I had more to offer you, but this is all I've got. You need it more 'n me, and there it is. No shame in that. Take it.'

There was a pause, then he felt it pulled out of his hand, heard her wrapping it round herself. 'Thanks,' she grunted.

He raised his eyebrows, wondering if he could have heard that right. Seemed there was a first time for everything. 'Alright. And to you.'

'Uh?'

'For the help. Under the city, and on the hill with the stones, and up on the roofs, and all the rest.' He thought about it for a moment. 'That's a lot of help. More than I deserve, most likely, but, well, I'm still good and grateful for it.' He waited for her to say something, but nothing came. Only the sound of the stream gurgling under the walls of the building, the sound of the wind hissing

through the empty windows, the sound of his own rough breathing. 'You're alright,' he said. 'That's all I'm saying. Whatever you try to make out, you're alright.'

More silence. He could see her outline in the moonlight, sitting near the wall, his coat wrapped round her shoulders, damp hair sticking spiky from her head, perhaps the slightest gleam of a yellow eye, watching him. He cursed to himself under his breath. He was no good at talking, never had been. Probably none of that meant anything to her. Still, at least he'd tried.

'You want to fuck?'

He looked up, mouth hanging open, not sure if he could've heard right. 'Eh?'

'What, pink, you gone deaf on me?'

'Have I what?'

'Alright! Forget it!' She turned away from him, pulling the coat angrily round her hunched shoulders.

'Hold on, though.' He was starting to catch up. 'I mean . . . I just wasn't expecting you to ask is all. I'm not saying no . . . I reckon . . . if you're asking.' He swallowed, his mouth dry. 'Are you asking?'

He saw her head turn back towards him. 'You're not saying no, or you're saying yes?'

'Well, er . . .' He puffed his cheeks out in the dark, tried to make his head work. He'd never thought to be asked that question again in all his days, and least of all by her. Now it had been asked, he was scared to answer. He couldn't deny it was somewhat of a daunting prospect, but it was better to do it, than to live in fear of it. A lot better. 'Yes, then. I think. I mean, of course I am. Why wouldn't I? I'm saying yes.'

'Uh.' He saw the outline of her face frowning down at the ground, thin lips pressed angrily together, like she'd been hoping for a different answer and wasn't quite sure what to do with the one he'd given. He wasn't either, if it came to that. 'How do you want to get it done?' Matter of fact, as if it was a job they had to get through, like cutting a tree down or digging a hole.

'Er . . . well, you'll have to get a bit closer, I reckon. I mean, I hope my cock ain't that disappointing, but it won't reach you over there.' He half smiled, then cursed to himself when she didn't. He knew she wasn't much for jokes.

'Right then.' She came at him so quick and businesslike he half backed off, and that made her falter.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Haven't done this in a while.'

'No.' She squatted down next to him, lifted her arm, paused as if she was wondering what to do with it. 'Nor me.' He felt her fingertips on the back of his hand – gentle, cautious. It almost tickled, her touch was so light. Her thumb rubbed at the stump of his middle finger, and he watched her do it, grey shapes moving in the shadows, awkward as a pair who'd never touched another person in their lives. Strange feeling, having a woman so close to him. Brought back all kind of memories.

Logen reached up slowly, feeling like he was about to put his hand in the fire, and touched Ferro's face. It didn't burn. Her skin was smooth and cool, just like anyone's would have been. He pushed his hand into her hair, felt it tickling the webs between his fingers. He found the scar on her forehead with

the very tip of his thumb, traced the line of it down her cheek to the corner of her mouth, tugging at her lip, his skin brushing rough against hers.

There was a strange set to her face, he could tell it even in the dark. It was one he wasn't used to seeing on her, but there was no mistaking it. He could feel the muscles tense under her skin, see the moonlight on the cords standing from her scrawny neck. She was scared. She could laugh while she kicked a man in the face, smile at cuts and punches, treat an arrow through her flesh like it was nothing, but it seemed a gentle touch could put the fear in her. Would've seemed pretty strange to Logen, if he hadn't been so damn frightened himself. Frightened and excited all at once.

They started pulling at each other's clothes together, as if someone had given the signal for the charge and they were keen to get it over with. He struggled with the buttons on her shirt in the darkness, hands trembling, chewing at his lip, as clumsy as if he'd had gauntlets on. She had his open before he'd even done one of hers.

'Shit!' he hissed. She slapped his hands away and undid the buttons herself, pulled her shirt off and dropped it beside her. He couldn't see much in the moonlight, only the gleaming of her eyes, the dark outline of her bony shoulders and her bony waist, splashes of faint light between her ribs and the curve underneath one tit, a bit of rough skin round a nipple, maybe.

He felt her pull his belt open, felt her cool fingers sliding into his trousers, felt her—

'Ah! Shit! You don't have to lift me up by it!'

'Alright . . .'

'Ah.'

'Better?'

'Ah.' He dragged at her belt and fumbled it open, dug his hand down inside. Hardly subtle, maybe, but then he'd never been known for subtlety. His fingertips made it more or less into hair before he got his wrist stuck tight. It wouldn't go any further, for all his straining.

'Shit,' he muttered, heard Ferro suck her teeth, felt her shift and grab her trousers with her free hand, dragging them down over her arse. That was better. He slid his hand up her bare thigh. Good thing he still had one middle finger. They have their uses.

They stayed like that for a while, the pair of them kneeling in the dirt, nothing much moving apart from their two hands working back and forward, up and down, in and out, starting slow and gentle and getting quicker, silent except for Ferro's breath hissing through her teeth, Logen's rasping in his throat, the quiet suck and squelch of damp skin moving.

She pushed herself up against him, wriggling out of her trousers, shoving him back up against the wall. He cleared his throat, suddenly hoarse. 'Should I —'

'Ssss.' She got up on one foot and one knee, squatting over him with her legs wide open, spat in one cupped hand and took hold of his cock with it. She muttered something, shifting her weight, easing herself down onto him, grunting softly. 'Urrrr.'

'Ah.' He reached out and pulled her closer, one hand squeezing at the back of her thigh, feeling the muscles bunch and shift as she moved, the other

tangled tight in her greasy hair, dragging her head down against his face. His trousers were screwed up tight round his ankles. He tried to kick them off and only got them tangled worse than ever, but he was damned if he was going to ask her to stop just for that.

‘Urrrr,’ she whispered at him, mouth open, lips sliding warm and soft against his cheek, breath hot and sour in his mouth, her skin rubbing against his, and sticking to it, and peeling away again.

‘Ah,’ he grunted back at her, and she rocked her hips against him, back and forward, back and forward, back and forward.

‘Urrrr.’ One of her hands was clamped round his jaw, her thumb in his mouth, the other was between her legs, sliding up and down, he could feel her wet fingers curling round his fruits, more than a bit painful, more than a bit pleasant.

‘Ah.’

‘Urrrr.’

‘Ah.’

‘Urrrr.’

‘Ah—’

‘What?’

‘Er . . .’

‘You’re joking!’

‘Well . . .’

‘I was just getting started!’

‘I did say it’d been a long time—’

‘Must’ve been years!’ She slid off his wilting cock, wiped herself with one hand and smeared it angrily on the wall, dropped down on her side with her back to him, grabbed his coat and dragged it over her.

So that was an embarrassment, and no mistake.

Logen cursed silently to himself. All that time waiting and he hadn’t been able to keep the milk in the bucket. He scratched his face sadly, picked at his scabby chin. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he’s a lover.

He looked sideways at Ferro, at her faint outline in the darkness. Spiky hair, long neck stretched out, sharp shoulder, long arm pressed down against her side. Even with the coat over her he could see the rise of her hip, he could guess her shape underneath. He looked at her skin, knowing what it felt like – smooth, and sleek, and cool. He could hear her breathing. Soft, slow, warm breathing . . .

Hold on.

There was something stirring down below again, now. Sore, but definitely stiffening. The one advantage of having a long time without – the bucket fills up again quick. Logen licked his lips. It would be a shame to let the chance pass, just for a lack of nerve. He slid down beside her, shuffled up close, and cleared his throat.

‘What?’ Her voice was sharp, but not quite sharp enough to warn him off.

‘Well, you know, give me a minute, and maybe . . .’ He lifted the coat up and ran his hand up her side, skin hissing quietly against skin, nice and slow, so she had plenty of time to shove him off. It wouldn’t have surprised him any if she’d turned over and kneed him in the fruits. But she didn’t.

She shifted back against him, her bare arse pressing into his stomach, lifting one knee up. 'Why should I be giving you another chance?'

'I don't know . . .' he muttered, starting to grin. He slid his hand gently over her chest, across her belly, down between her legs. 'Same reason you gave me the first one?'

Ferro woke with a sudden jolt, not knowing where she was, only that she was trapped. She snarled and thrashed and flailed out with her elbow, fought her way free and scrambled away, teeth gritted, fists clenched to fight. But there were no enemies. Only bare dirt and bleak rock in the pale grey morning.

That and the big pink.

Ninefingers stumbled up, grunting and spitting, staring wildly around. When he saw no Flatheads poised to kill him he turned slowly to look at Ferro, eyes blinking bleary with sleep. 'Ah . . .' He winced and touched his fingertips to his bloody mouth. They glared at each other for a moment, both stark naked and silent in the cold shell of the ruined mill, the coat they had been lying under crumpled on the damp earth between them.

And that was when Ferro realised that she had made three serious mistakes.

She had let herself fall asleep, and nothing good ever happened when she did that. Then she had elbowed Ninefingers in the face. And what was much, much worse, so stupid she almost grimaced to think of it: she had fucked him the night before. Staring at him now in the harsh light of day, hair plastered against one side of his scarred and bloody face, a great smear of dirt down his pale side where he had been lying in the mud, she was not sure why. For some reason, cold and tired in the dark, she had wanted to touch someone, and be warm for just a moment, and she had let herself think – who would be worse off for it?

Madness.

They both were worse off, that was clear enough. Where things had been simple, now they were sure to be complicated. Where they had been getting an understanding, now there would be only confusion. She was confused already, and he was starting to look hurt, and angry, and what was the surprise? No one enjoys an elbow in the face while they sleep. She opened her mouth to say sorry, and it was then she realised. She did not even know the word. All she could do was say it in Kantic, but she was so angry with herself she growled it at him like an insult.

He certainly took it as one. His eyes narrowed and he snapped something at her in his own tongue, snatched his trousers up and shoved one leg in, muttering angrily under his breath.

'Fucking pink,' she hissed back, fists bunched with a surge of fury. She snatched up her torn shirt and turned her back on him. She must have left it in a wet patch. The ragged cloth stuck tight to her crawling skin like a layer of cold mud as she yanked it on.

Damn shirt. Damn pink.

She ground her teeth with frustration as she dragged her belt closed. Damn belt. If only she could have kept it closed. It was always the same. Nothing was easy with people, but she could always count on herself to make things

more difficult than they had to be. She paused for a moment, with her head down, then she half turned towards him.

She was about to try and explain that she had not meant to smash his mouth, but that nothing good ever happened when she slept. She was about to try and tell him that she had made a mistake, that she had only wanted to be warm. She was about to ask him to wait.

But he was already stomping out of the broken doorway with the rest of his clothes clutched in one hand.

‘Fuck him then,’ she hissed as she sat down to pull her boots on.

But then that was the whole problem.



Jeza! sat on the broken steps of the temple, picking sadly at the frayed stitches on the torn-off shoulder of his coat, and staring out across the limitless expanse of mud towards the ruins of Aulcus. Looking for nothing.

Bayaz lay propped up in the back of the cart, face bony and corpse-pale with veins bulging round his sunken eyes, a hard frown chiselled into his colourless lips. ‘How long do we wait?’ asked Jeza!, once again.

‘As long as it takes,’ snapped the Magus, without even looking at him. ‘We need them.’

Jeza! saw Brother Longfoot, standing higher up on the steps with his arms folded, give him a worried glance. ‘You are, of course, my employer, and it is scarcely my place to disagree—’

‘Don’t then,’ growled Bayaz.

‘But Ninefingers and the woman Maljinn,’ persisted the Navigator, ‘are most decidedly dead. Master Luthar quite specifically saw them slide into a chasm. A chasm of very great depth. My grief is immeasurable, and I am a patient man, few more, it is one among my many admirable qualities but . . . well . . . were we to wait until the end of time, I fear that it would make no—’

‘As long . . .’ snarled the First of the Magi, ‘as it takes.’

Jeza! took a deep breath and frowned into the wind, looking down from the hill towards the city, eyes scanning over the expanse of flat nothing, pocked with tiny creases where streams ran, the grey stripe of a ruined road creeping out towards them from the far-off walls, between the streaky outlines of ruined buildings: inns, farms, villages, all long fallen.

‘They’re down there,’ came Quai’s emotionless voice.

Jeza! stood up, weight on his good leg, shading his hand and staring at where the apprentice was pointing. He saw them suddenly, two tiny brown figures in a brown wasteland, down near the base of the rock.

‘What did I tell you?’ croaked Bayaz.

Longfoot shook his head in amazement. ‘How in God’s name could they have survived?’

‘They’re a resourceful pair, alright.’ Jeza! was already starting to grin. A month before he could not have dreamed that he would ever be glad to see Logen again, let alone Ferro, but here he was, smiling from ear to ear almost to see them still alive. Somehow, a bond was formed out here in the

wilderness, facing death and adversity together. A bond that strengthened quickly, regardless of all the great differences between them. A bond that left his old friendships weak, and pale, and passionless by comparison.

Jezal watched the figures come closer, trudging along the crumbling track that led up through the steep rocks to the temple, a great deal of space between the two of them, almost as if they were walking separately. Closer still, and they began to look like two prisoners that had escaped from hell. Their clothes were ripped, and torn, and utterly filthy, their dirty faces were hard as a pair of stones. Ferro had a scabbed-over gash across her forehead. Logen's jaw was a mass of grazes, the skin round his eyes stained with dark bruising.

Jezal took a hopping step towards them. 'What happened? How did—'

'Nothing happened,' barked Ferro.

'Nothing at all,' growled Ninefingers, and the two of them scowled angrily at each other. Plainly, they had both gone through some awful ordeal that neither one wished to discuss. Ferro stalked straight to the cart without the slightest greeting and started rooting through the back. Logen stood, hands on his hips, frowning grimly after her.

'So . . .' mumbled Jezal, not quite sure what to say, 'are you alright?'

Logen's eyes swivelled to his. 'Oh, I'm grand,' he said, with heavy irony. 'Never better. How the hell did you get that cart out of there?'

The apprentice shrugged. 'The horses pulled it out.'

'Master Quai has a gift for understatement,' chuckled Longfoot nervously. 'It was a most exhilarating ride to the city's South Gate—'

'Fight your way out, did you?'

'Well, not I, of course, fighting is not my—'

'Didn't think so.' Logen leaned over and spat sourly onto the mud.

'We should at least consider being grateful,' croaked Bayaz, the air sighing and crackling in his throat as he breathed in. 'There is much to be grateful for, after all. We are all still alive.'

'You sure?' snapped Ferro. 'You don't look it.' Jezal found himself in silent agreement there. The Magus could not have looked worse if he had actually died in Aulcus. Died, and already begun to decompose.

She ripped off her rag of a shirt and flung it savagely on the ground, sinews shifting across her scrawny back. 'Fuck are you looking at?' she snarled at Jezal.

'Nothing,' he muttered, staring down at the dirt. When he dared to look up she was buttoning a fresh one up the front. Well, not entirely fresh. He had been wearing it himself a few days ago.

'That's one of mine . . .' Ferro looked up at him with a glare so murderous that Jezal found himself taking a hesitant step back. 'But you're welcome to it . . . of course . . .'

'Ssss,' she hissed, jamming the hem violently down behind her belt, frowning all the while as if she was stabbing a man to death. Probably him. All in all, it was hardly the tearful reunion that Jezal might have hoped for, even if he did now feel somewhat like crying.

'I hope I never see this place again,' he muttered wistfully.

'I'm with you there,' said Logen. 'Not quite so empty as we thought, eh? Do

you think you could dream up a different way back?’

Bayaz frowned. ‘That would seem prudent. We will return to Calcis down the river. There are woods on this side of the water, further downstream. A few sturdy tree trunks lashed together, and the Aos will carry us straight to the sea.’

‘Or to a watery grave.’ Jezal remembered with some clarity the surging water in the canyon of the great river.

‘My hope is better. In any case, there are still long miles to cover westward before we think about the return journey.’

Longfoot nodded. ‘Indeed there are, including a pass through a most forbidding range of mountains.’

‘Lovely,’ said Logen. ‘I can hardly wait.’

‘Nor I. Unfortunately, not all the horses survived.’ The Navigator raised his eyebrows. ‘We have two to pull the cart, two to ride . . . that leaves us two short.’

‘I hate those fucking things anyway.’ Logen strode to the cart and clambered up opposite Bayaz in the back.

There was a long pause as they all considered the situation. Two horses, three riders. Never a happy position. Longfoot was the first to speak. ‘I will need, of course, to scout forward as we come close to the mountains. Scouting, alas, is an essential part of any successful journey. One for which, unfortunately, I will require one of the horses . . .’

‘I should probably ride,’ murmured Jezal, shifting painfully, ‘what with my leg . . .’

Ferro looked at the cart, and Jezal saw her eyes meet Logen’s for a brief and intensely hostile moment.

‘I’ll walk,’ she barked.

The Hero's Welcome

It was raining as Superior Glokta hobbled back into Adua. A mean, thin, ugly sort of rain on a hard wind off the sea, that rendered the treacherous wood of the gangplank, the squealing timbers of the wharf, the slick stones of the quay, all slippery as liars. He licked at his sore gums, rubbed at his sore thigh, swept his grimace up and down the grey shoreline. A pair of surly-looking guardsmen were leaning against a rotten warehouse ten paces away. Further on a party of dockers were involved in a bitter dispute over a heap of crates. A shivering beggar nearby took a couple of paces towards Glokta, thought better of it, and slunk away.

No crowds of cheering commoners? No carpet of flower petals? No archway of drawn swords? No bevy of swooning maidens? It was hardly too great a surprise. There had been none the last time he returned from the South. Crowds rarely cheer too loudly for the defeated, no matter how hard they fought, how great their sacrifices, how long the odds. Maidens might wet themselves over cheap and worthless victories, but they don't so much as blush for 'I did my best'. Nor will the Arch Lector, I fear.

A particularly vicious wave slapped at the sea wall and threw a cloud of sullen spray all over Glokta's back. He stumbled forward, cold water dripping from his cold hands, slipped and almost fell, tottered gasping across the quay and clung to the slimy wall of a crumbling shed at the far side. He looked up and saw the two guards staring at him.

'Is there something?' he snarled, and they turned their backs, muttering and pulling up their collars against the weather. Glokta fumbled his coat tight around him, felt the tails snatching at his wet legs. *A few months in the sun and you feel as though you'll never be cold again. How soon we forget.* He frowned up and down the empty wharves. How soon we all forget.

'Ome ageh.' Frost looked pleased as he stepped off the gangplank with Glokta's box under his arm.

'You don't much like hot weather, do you?'

The Practical shook his heavy head, half-grinning into the winter drizzle, white hair spiky with wet. Severard followed behind him, squinting up at the grey clouds. He paused for a moment at the end of the plank, then he stepped off onto the stones of the quay.

'Good to be back,' he said.

I only wish I could share your enthusiasm, but I cannot relax quite yet. 'His Eminence has sent for me, and judging by the way we left things in Dagoska, I think it more than likely that the meeting will . . . not go well.' *A spectacular understatement.* 'You had better stay out of sight for a couple of days.'

'Out of sight? I don't plan to see outside of a whorehouse for a week.'

'Very wise. And Severard. In case we don't see each other again. Good luck.'

The Practical's eyes glinted. 'Always.' Glokta watched him stroll off through

the rain towards the seedier parts of town. *Just another day for Practical Severard. Never thinking more than an hour ahead. What a gift.*

'Damn your miserable country and damn its bloody weather,' Vitari grumbled in her sing-song accent. 'I have to go and speak to Sult.'

'Why so do I!' cried Glokta with exaggerated glee. 'What a charming coincidence!' He offered her his bent elbow. 'We can make a couple, and visit his Eminence together!'

She stared back at him. 'Alright.'

But the pair of you will have to wait another hour for my head. 'There's just one call I need to make first.'

The tip of his stick cracked against the door. No answer. *Damn it.* Glokta's back was hurting like hell and he needed to sit down. He rapped again with his cane, harder this time. The hinges creaked, the door swung open a crack. *Unlocked.* He frowned, pushed it all the way. The door frame was split inside, the lock shattered. *Broken open.* He limped across the threshold, into the hall. Empty and frosty cold. Not a stick of furniture anywhere. *Almost as if she moved out. But why?* Glokta's eyelid gave a twitch. He had scarcely once thought about Ardee his whole time in the South. *Other matters seemed so much more pressing. My one friend gave me this one task. If anything has happened to her...*

Glokta pointed to the stairs, and Vitari nodded and crept up them silently, bending and sliding a glinting knife out from her boot. He pointed down the hall and Frost padded off deeper into the house, pressed up into the shadows by the wall. The living room door stood ajar, and Glokta shuffled to it and pushed it open.

Ardee was sitting in the window with her back to him: white dress, dark hair, just as he remembered her. He saw her head move slightly as the door's hinges creaked. *Alive, then.* But the room was strangely altered. Aside from the one chair she sat in, it was entirely empty. Bare whitewashed walls, bare wooden boards, windows without curtains.

'There's nothing fucking left!' she barked, voice cracked and throaty.

Clearly. Glokta frowned, and stepped through the door into the room.

'Nothing left, I said!' She stood up, still with her back to him. 'Or did you decide you'd take the chair after all?' She spun round, grabbing hold of the back, lifted it over her head and flung it at him with a shriek. It crashed into the wall beside the door, sending fragments of wood and plaster flying. One leg whizzed past Glokta's face and clattered into the corner, the rest tumbled to the floor in a mass of dust and splintered sticks.

'Most kind,' murmured Glokta, 'but I prefer to stand.'

'You!' He could see her eyes wide with surprise through her tangled hair. There was a gauntness and a paleness to her face that he did not remember. Her dress was rumpled, and far too thin for the chilly room. She tried to smooth it with shivering hands, plucked ineffectually at her greasy hair. She gave a snort of laughter. 'I'm afraid I'm not really prepared for visitors.'

Glokta heard Frost thumping down the hall, saw him looming up at the doorway, fists clenched. He held up a finger. 'It's alright. Wait outside.' The

albino faded back into the shadows, and Glokta hobbled across the creaking boards into the empty sitting room. 'What happened?'

Ardee's mouth twisted. 'It seems my father was not nearly so well off as everyone imagined. He had debts. Soon after my brother left for England, they came to collect.'

'Who came?'

'A man called Fallow. He took all the money I had, but it wasn't enough. They took the plate, my mother's jewels, such as they were. They gave me six weeks to find the rest. I let my maid go. I sold everything I could, but they wanted more. Then they came again. Three days ago. They took everything. Fallow said I was lucky he was leaving me the dress I was wearing.'

'I see.'

She took a deep, shuddering breath. 'Since then, I have been sitting here, and thinking on how a friendless young woman can come by some money.' She fixed him with her eye. 'I have thought of only one way. I daresay, if I had the courage, I would have done it already.'

Glokta sucked at his gums. 'Lucky for us both that you're a coward, then.' He shrugged one shoulder out of his coat, then had to wriggle and flail to get his arm out. Once he finally did, he had to fumble his cane across into his other hand so he could finally throw it off. *Damn it. I can't even make a generous gesture gracefully.* Finally he held it out to her, tottering slightly on his weak leg.

'You sure you don't need it more than me?'

'Take it. At least then I won't have to get the bloody thing back on.'

That brought half a smile from her. 'Thank you,' she muttered as she pulled it round her shoulders. 'I tried to find you, but I didn't know . . . where you were . . .'

'I am sorry for that, but I am here now. You need not worry about anything. You will have to come and stay with me tonight. My quarters are not spacious, but we'll find a way.' *There will be plenty of room once I am face down in the docks, after all.*

'What about after that?'

'After that you will come here. Tomorrow this house will be just as it was.'

She stared at him. 'How?'

'Oh, I will see to it. First of all we get you in the warm.' *Superior Glokta, friend to the friendless.*

She closed her eyes as he spoke, and he heard breath snorting fast through her nose. She swayed slightly, as if she hardly had the strength to stand any longer. *Strange how, as long as the hardship lasts, we can stand it. As soon as the crisis is over, the strength all leeches away in an instant.* Glokta reached out, almost touched her shoulder to steady her, but at the last moment her eyes flickered open, and she straightened up again, and he pulled his hand away.

Superior Glokta, rescuer of young women in distress. He guided her into the hallway and towards the broken front door. 'If you could give me one moment with my Practicals.'

'Of course.' Ardee looked up at him, big, dark eyes rimmed with worried pink. 'And thank you. Whatever they say, you're a good man.'

Glokta had to stifle a sudden urge to giggle. *A good man? I doubt that Salem*

Rews would agree. Or Gofred Hornlach, or Magister Kault, or Korsten dan Vurms, General Vissbruck, Ambassador Islik, Inquisitor Harker, or any of a hundred others scattered through the penal colonies of England or squatting in Dagoska, waiting to die. And yet Ardee West thinks me a good man. A strange feeling, and not an unpleasant one. It feels almost like being human again. What a shame that it comes so late in the day.

He beckoned to Frost as Ardee shuffled out in his black coat. 'I have a task for you, my old friend. One last task.' Glokta slapped his hand down on the albino's heavy shoulder and squeezed it. 'Do you know a moneylender called Fallow?'

Frost nodded slowly.

'Find him and hurt him. Bring him here and make him understand who he has offended. Everything must be restored, better than it was, tell him that. Give him one day. One day, and then you find him, wherever he is, and you start cutting. You hear me? Do me that one favour.'

Frost nodded again, his pink eyes glinting in the dim hallway.

'Sult will be expecting us,' murmured Vitari, peering down at them from the stairs, arms crossed, gloved hands hanging limp over the rail.

'Of course he will.' Glokta winced as he hobbled to the open door. *And we wouldn't want to keep his Eminence waiting.*

Click, tap, pain, that was the rhythm of Glokta's walking. The confident click of his right heel, the tap of his cane on the echoing tiles of the hallway, then the long scrape of his left foot with the familiar pain in the knee, arse and back. Click, tap, pain.

He had walked from the docks to Ardee's house, to the Agriont, to the House of Questions, and all the way up here. *Limped. On my own. Without help.* Now every step was agony. He grimaced with each movement. He grunted and sweated and cursed. *But I'm damned if I'm slowing down.*

'You don't like to make things easy, do you?' muttered Vitari.

'Why should they be?' he snapped. 'You can console yourself with the thought that this conversation will most likely be our last.'

'Then why even come? Why not run?'

Glokta snorted. 'In case you hadn't noticed, I am an exceptionally poor runner. That and I'm curious.' *Curious to know why his Eminence didn't leave me there to rot along with all the rest.*

'Your curiosity might be the death of you.'

'If the Arch Lector wants me dead, limping the other way will do me little good. I'd rather take it standing up.' He winced at a sudden spasm through his leg. 'Or maybe sitting down. Either way, face to face, with my eyes open.'

'Your choice, I suppose.'

'That's right.' *My last one.*

They came into Sult's ante-room. He had to admit to being somewhat surprised to have come this far. He had been expecting every black-masked Practical they had passed in the building to seize hold of him. He had been expecting every black-clothed Inquisitor to point and scream for his immediate arrest. *And yet here I am again.* The heavy desk, the heavy chairs, the two

towering Practicals flanking the heavy doors, were all the same.

'I am—'

'Superior Glokta, of course.' The Arch Lector's secretary bowed his head respectfully. 'You may go in at once. His Eminence is expecting you.' Light spilled out of the Arch Lector's office and into the narrow chamber.

'I'll wait here.' Vitari slid into one of the chairs and swung her damp boots up on an other.

'Don't bother waiting too long.' *My last words, perhaps?* Glokta cursed inwardly as he shuffled towards the doorway. *I really should have thought of something more memorable.* He paused for just a moment at the threshold, took a deep breath, and hobbled through.

The same airy, round room. The same dark furniture, the same dark pictures on the bright walls, the same great window with the same view of the University, and the House of the Maker beyond. *No assassins loitering under the table, no axemen waiting behind the door.* Only Sult himself, sitting at his desk with a pen in hand, the nib scratching calmly and evenly across some papers spread out before him.

'Superior Glokta!' Sult started up and swept gracefully across the polished floor towards him, white coat flapping. 'I'm so glad you are safely returned!' The Arch Lector gave every impression of being pleased to see him, and Glokta frowned. He had been prepared for almost anything but this.

Sult held out his hand, the stone on his ring of office flashing purple sparks. Glokta grimaced as he bent slowly to kiss it. 'I serve and obey, your Eminence.' He straightened up with an effort. *No knife in the back of the neck?* But Sult was already flowing across to the cabinet, grinning broadly.

'Sit, please sit! You need not wait to be asked!'

Since when? Glokta grunted his way into one of the chairs, taking only the briefest moment to check for poisoned spikes on the seat. The Arch Lector, meanwhile, had plucked open the cabinet and was rummaging inside. *Will he pull out a loaded flatbow, and shoot me through the throat?* But all that emerged were two glasses. 'It would seem congratulations are in order,' he threw over his shoulder.

Glokta blinked. 'What?'

'Congratulations. Excellent work.' Sult grinned down at him as he slid the glasses gracefully onto the round table, eased the stopper, clinking, from the decanter. *What to say? What to say?*

'Your Eminence . . . Dagoska . . . I must be candid. It was on the point of falling when I left. Very soon now, the city will be overrun—'

'Of course it will.' Sult dismissed it all with a wave of his white-gloved hand. 'There was never the slightest chance of holding it. The best I was hoping for was that you'd make the Gurmish pay! And how you did that, eh, Glokta? How you did that!'

'Then . . . you are . . . pleased?' He hardly dared say the word.

'I am delighted! If I had written the tale myself, it could not have worked out better! The incompetence of the Lord Governor, the treachery of his son, it all showed how little the regular authorities can be relied upon in a crisis. Eider's treason exposed the duplicity of the merchants, their dubious connections, their rotten morality! The Spicers have been dissolved alongside

the Mercers: their trade rights are in our hands. The pair of them, consigned to the latrine of history and the power of the merchants broken! Only his Majesty's Inquisition remained staunch in the face of the Union's most implacable enemy. You should have seen Marovia's face when I presented the confessions to the Open Council!' Sult filled Glokta's glass all the way to the top.

'Most kind, your Eminence,' he muttered as he took a sip from it. *Excellent wine, as always.*

'And then he got up in the Closed Council, before the King himself, mark you, and declared to everyone that you wouldn't last a week once the Gurkish attacked!' The Arch Lector spluttered with laughter. 'I wish you could have been there. I'm confident he'll do better than that, I said. Confident he'll do better.' *A ringing endorsement indeed.*

Sult slapped the table with his white-gloved palm. 'Two months, Glokta! Two months! With every day that passed he looked more of a fool, and I looked more of a hero . . . we, that is,' he corrected himself, 'we looked like heroes, and all I had to do was smile! You could almost see them, each day, shuffling their chairs away from Marovia and down towards me! Last week they voted extra powers to the Inquisition. Nine votes to three. Nine to three! Next week we'll go further! How the hell did you manage it?' And he gazed at Glokta expectantly.

I sold myself to the bank that funded the Mercers, then used the proceeds to bribe the world's least reliable mercenary. Then I murdered a defenceless emissary under flag of parley and tortured a serving girl until her body was mincemeat. Oh, and I let the biggest traitor of the lot go free. It was, without doubt, a heroic business. How did I manage it? 'Rising early,' he murmured.

Sult's eye flickered, and Glokta caught it. *A trace of annoyance, perhaps? A trace of mistrust?* But it was quickly extinguished. 'Rising early. Of course.' He raised his glass. 'The second greatest virtue. It comes just behind ruthlessness. I like your style, Glokta, I've always said so.'

Have you indeed? But Glokta humbly inclined his head.

'Practical Vitari's despatches were filled with admiration. I particularly enjoyed the way you dealt with the Gurkish emissary. That must have wiped the smile from the Emperor's face, if only for a moment, the arrogant swine.' *So she kept her end of the bargain, then? Interesting.* 'Yes, things proceed smoothly. Except for the damn peasants making a nuisance of themselves, and Angland of course. Shame about Ladisla.'

'About Ladisla?' asked Glokta, baffled.

Sult looked sour. 'You didn't hear? Another of High Justice Marovia's brilliant notions. He had it in mind to lift the Crown Prince's popularity by giving him a command in the North. Something out of the way, where he'd be in no danger and we could heap him with glory. It wasn't a bad scheme, really, except that out of the way became in the way, and he commanded himself straight into his grave.'

'His army with him?'

'A few thousand of them, but mostly that rubbish the nobles sent as levies. Nothing of much significance. Ostenhorm is still in our hands, and it wasn't my idea so, all in all, no harm done. Between you and me it's probably for the

best, Ladisla was insufferable. I had to dig him out of more than one scandal. Never could keep his trousers closed, the damn halfwit. Raynault seems to be a different kind of a man. Sober, sensible. Do as he's bloody told. Better all round. Providing he doesn't go and get himself killed, of course, we'd be in a pickle then.' Sult took another swig from his glass and worked it round his mouth with some satisfaction.

Glokta cleared his throat. *While he is in a good mood . . .* 'There was one issue I wished to discuss with you, your Eminence. The Gurkish agent we found within the city. She was . . .' *How to describe this without sounding like a madman?*

But Sult was ahead of him once again. 'I know. An Eater.' *You know? Even about this?* The Arch Lector sat back and shook his head. 'An occult abomination. A tale straight from a story book. Eating the flesh of men. Apparently it is a practice well established down in the barbaric South. But don't concern yourself about it. I am already taking advice.'

'Who gives advice about such things as these?'

The Arch Lector only flashed his silky smile. 'You must be tired. The weather over there can be so very draining. All that heat and dust, even in the winter. Take a rest. You deserve it. I'll send for you if anything comes up.' And Sult took up his pen and looked back to his papers, leaving Glokta with nothing to do but shuffle for the door, a look of profound puzzlement on his face.

'You almost look like you're still alive,' muttered Vitari as he hobbled out into the anteroom.

True. Or about as close as I come to it. 'Sult was . . . pleased.' He still could hardly believe it. The very words sounded strange together.

'He damn well should be, after the talking-up I gave you.'

'Huh.' Glokta frowned. 'It seems I owe you an apology.'

'Keep it. It isn't worth shit to me. Just trust me next time.'

'A fair demand,' he conceded, glancing sideways at her. *But you have to be joking.*

The chamber was filled with fine furniture. *Almost overfilled.* Richly upholstered chairs, an antique table, a polished cabinet, all lavish for the small sitting-room. A huge old painting of the Lords of the Union paying homage to Harod the Great entirely filled one wall. A thick Kantic carpet had been rolled out across the boards, almost too big for the floor. A healthy fire crackled in the grate between two antique vases, and the room was homely, and pleasant, and warm. *What a difference a day can make, with the right encouragement.*

'Good,' said Glokta as he looked round. 'Very good.'

'Of course,' muttered Fallow, head bowed respectfully, hat halfway to being crushed in his hands. 'Of course, Superior, I have done everything possible. Most of the furniture I had . . . I had sold already, and so I replaced with better, the best I could find. The rest of the house is just the same. I hope that . . . I hope that it's adequate?'

'I hope so too. Is it adequate?'

Ardee was scowling at Fallow. 'It will serve.'

'Excellent,' said the moneylender nervously, glancing briefly at Frost and then down at his boots. 'Excellent! Please accept my very deepest apologies! I had no idea, of course, absolutely no idea, Superior, that you were involved in any way. Of course, I would never . . . I am so very sorry.'

'It really isn't me you should be apologising to, is it?'

'No, no, of course.' He turned slowly to Ardee. 'My lady, please accept my deepest apologies.'

Ardee glared at him, lip curled, and said nothing.

'Perhaps if you were to beg,' suggested Glokta. 'On your knees. That might do it.'

Fallow dropped to his knees without hesitation. He wrung his hands 'My lady, please—'

'Lower,' said Glokta.

'Of course,' he muttered as he fell to all fours. 'I do apologise, my lady. Most humbly. If you could only find it in your heart, I beg you—' He reached out gingerly to touch the hem of her dress and she jerked back, then swung her foot and kicked him savagely in the face.

'Gah!' squawked the moneylender, rolling onto his side, dark blood bubbling out of his nose and all over the new carpet. Glokta felt his brows go up. *That was unexpected.*

'That's for you, fucker!' The next kick caught him in the mouth and his head snapped back, spots of blood spattering onto the far wall. Ardee's shoe thudded into his gut and folded him up tight.

'You,' she snarled, 'you . . .' She kicked him again and again and Fallow shuddered and grunted and sighed, curling up in a ball. Frost moved away from the wall a step, and Glokta held up his finger.

'That's alright,' he murmured, 'I think she has it covered.'

The kicks began to slow. Glokta could hear Ardee gasping for air. Her heel dug into Fallow's ribs, her toe cracked into his nose again. *If she ever gets bored, she might have a bright future as a Practical.* She worked her mouth, leaned over and spat onto the side of his face. She kicked him again, weakly, then stumbled back against the cabinet and leaned on the polished wood, bent over and breathing hard.

'Happy?' asked Glokta.

She stared up at him through her tangled hair. 'Not really.'

'Will kicking him some more make you happier?'

Her brows wrinkled as she looked down at Fallow, wheezing on his side on the carpet. She took a step forward and booted him hard in the chest one more time, rocked away, wiping some snot from under her nose. She pushed her hair out of her face. 'I'm done.'

'Fine. Get out,' hissed Glokta. 'Out, worm!'

'Of course,' Fallow drooled through his bloody lips, crawling for the door, Frost looming over him the whole way. 'Of course! Thank you! Thank you all so much!' The front door banged shut.

Ardee sat down heavily in one of the chairs, elbows resting on her knees, forehead resting on her palms. Glokta could see her hands trembling slightly. *It can really be very tiring, hurting someone. I should know. Especially if you aren't used to it.* 'I wouldn't feel too badly,' he said. 'I'm sure he deserved it.'

She looked up, and her eyes were hard. 'I don't. He deserves worse.'

That was unexpected too. 'Do you want him to have worse?'

She swallowed, slowly sat back. 'No.'

'Up to you.' *But it's nice to have the option.* 'You may want to change your clothes.'

She looked down. 'Oh.' Spots of Fallow's blood were spattered as far as her knees. 'I don't have anything—'

'There's a room full of new ones, upstairs. I made sure of it. I'll arrange for some dependable servants as well.'

'I don't need them.'

'Yes, you do. I won't hear of you here alone.'

She shrugged her shoulders hopelessly. 'I have nothing to pay them with.'

'Don't worry. I'll take care of it.' *All compliments of the hugely generous Valint and Balk, after all.* 'Don't worry about anything. I made a promise to your brother, and I mean to see it through. I'm very sorry that things came this far. I had a great deal to take care of . . . in the South. Have you heard from him, by the way?'

Ardee looked up sharply, her mouth slightly open. 'You don't know?'

'Know what?'

She swallowed, and stared down at the floor. 'Collem was with Prince Ladisla, at this battle that everyone is talking of. Some prisoners were taken, have been ransomed – he wasn't among them. They presume . . .' She paused for a moment, staring at the blood on her dress. 'They presume he was killed.'

'Killed?' Glokta's eyelid fluttered. His knees felt suddenly weak. He took a lurching step back and sank into a chair. His own hands were trembling now, and he clasped them together. *Deaths. They happen every day. I caused thousands of them not long ago, with hardly a thought. I looked at heaps of corpses and shrugged. What makes this one so hard to take?* And yet it was.

'Killed?' he whispered.

She nodded slowly, and put her face in her hands.

Cold Comfort

West peered out of the bushes, through the drifting flakes of snow, down the slope toward the Union picket. The sentries were sat in a rough circle, hunched round a steaming pan over a miserable tongue of fire on the far side of the stream. They wore thick coats, breath smoking, weapons almost forgotten in the snow around them. West knew how they felt. Bethod might come this week, he might come next week, but the cold they had to fight every minute of every day.

'Right then,' whispered Threetrees. 'You'd best go down there on your own. They might not like the looks of me and the rest of the boys, all rushing down on 'em from the trees.'

The Dogman grinned. 'Might shoot one of us.'

'And that'd be some kind o' shame,' hissed Dow, 'after we come so far.'

'Give us the shout when they're good and ready for a crew of Northmen to come wandering out the woods, eh?'

'I will,' said West. He dragged the heavy sword out of his belt and handed it to Threetrees. 'You'd better hold on to this for me.'

'Good luck,' said the Dogman.

'Good luck,' said Dow, lips curling back into his savage grin. 'Furious.'

West walked out slowly from the trees and down the gentle slope towards the stream, his stolen boots crunching in the snow, his hands held up above his head, to show he was unarmed. Even so, he could hardly have blamed the sentries if they shot him on sight. No one could have looked more like a dangerous savage than he did now, he knew. The last tatters of his uniform were hidden beneath a bundle of furs and torn scraps, tied around his body with twine, a stained coat stolen from a dead Northman over the top. He had a few weeks' growth of scraggy beard across his scabby face, his eyes were sore and watering, sunken with hunger and exhaustion. He looked like a desperate man, and what was more, he knew, he was one. A killer. The man who murdered Crown Prince Ladisla. The very worst of traitors.

One of the sentries looked up and saw him, started clumsily from his place, knocking the pan hissing into the fire, snatching his spear out of the snow. 'Stop!' he shouted, in slurred Northern. The others jumped up after him, grabbing at their weapons, one fumbling at the string on his flatbow with mittened fingers.

West stopped, flecks of snow settling gently on his tangled hair and across his shoulders. 'Don't worry,' he shouted back in common. 'I'm on your side.'

They stared at him for a moment. 'We'll see!' shouted one. 'Come on across the water, but do it slow!'

He crunched on down the slope and sloshed out into the stream, gritted his teeth as the freezing water soaked him up to his thighs. He struggled up the far bank and the four sentries shuffled into a nervous half circle around him,

weapons raised.

‘Watch him!’

‘It could be a trick!’

‘It’s no trick,’ said West slowly, keeping his eyes on the various hovering blades and trying to stay calm. It was vitally important to stay calm. ‘I’m one of you.’

‘Where the hell have you come from?’

‘I was with Prince Ladisla’s division.’

‘With Ladisla? You walked up here?’

West nodded. ‘I walked.’ The bodies of the sentries started to relax, the spear-points started to waver and drift upwards. They were on the point of believing him. After all, he spoke the common tongue like a native, and certainly looked as if he had slogged a hundred leagues across country. ‘What’s your name, then?’ asked the one with the flatbow.

‘Colonel West,’ he muttered, voice cracking. He felt like a liar even though it was true. He was a different man from the one who set out for England.

The sentries exchanged worried glances. ‘I thought he was dead,’ mumbled the one with the spear.

‘Not quite, lad,’ said West. ‘Not quite.’

Lord Marshal Burr was poring over a table covered in crumpled maps as West pushed through the flap into his tent. It seemed in the lamplight that the pressures of command had taken their toll on him. He looked older, paler, weaker, his hair and beard wild and straggling. He had lost weight and his creased uniform hung loose, but he started up with all his old vigour.

‘Colonel West, as I live and breathe! I never thought to see you again!’ He seized West’s hand and squeezed it hard. ‘I’m glad you made it. Damn glad! I’ve missed your cool head around here, I don’t mind telling you.’ He stared searchingly into West’s eyes. ‘You look tired, though, my friend.’

There was no denying it. West had never been the prettiest fellow in the Agriont, that he knew, but he had always prided himself on having an honest, friendly, pleasant look. He had scarcely recognised the face in the mirror once he had taken his first bath in weeks, dragged on a borrowed uniform, and finally shaved. Everything was changed, sharpened, leached of colour. The prominent cheekbones had grown craggy, the thinning hair and brows were full of iron grey, the jaw was lean and wolf-like. Angry lines were cut deep into the skin down the pale cheeks, across the narrow bridge of the sharp nose, out from the corners of the eyes. The eyes were worst of all. Narrow. Hungry. Icy grey, as though the bitter cold had eaten into his skull and still lurked there, even in the warmth. He had tried to think of old times, to smile and laugh, and use the expressions he had used to use, but it all looked foolish on that stone wall of a face. A hard man had glared back at him from the glass, and would not go away.

‘It was a difficult journey, sir.’

Burr nodded. ‘Of course it was, of course. A bastard of a journey and the wrong time of year for it. A good thing I sent those Northmen with you, eh, as it turned out?’

'A very good thing, sir. A most courageous and resourceful group. They saved my life, more than once.' He glanced sideways at Pike, loitering behind him in the shadows at a respectful distance. 'All our lives.'

Burr peered over at the convict's melted face. 'And who is this?'

'This is Pike, sir, a Sergeant with the Stariksa levies, cut off from his company in the battle.' The lies spilled out of West's mouth with a surprising ease. 'He and a girl, I believe a cook's daughter who was with the baggage, joined us on the way north. He has been a great help, sir, a good man in a tight spot. Wouldn't have made it without him.'

'Excellent!' said Burr, walking over to the convict and seizing his hand. 'Well done. Your regiment is gone, Pike. Not many survivors, I'm sorry to say. Damn few survivors, but I can always use trustworthy men here at my headquarters. Especially ones who are good in a tight spot.' He gave a long sigh. 'I have few enough of 'em to hand. I hope that you'll agree to stay with us.'

The convict swallowed. 'Of course, Lord Marshal, it would be an honour.'

'What about Prince Ladisla?' murmured Burr.

West took a deep breath and looked down at the ground. 'Prince Ladisla . . .' He trailed off and slowly shook his head. 'Horsemen surprised us, and overran the headquarters. It happened so fast . . . I looked for him afterwards, but . . .'

'I see. Well. There it is. He should never have been in command, but what could I do? I'm only in charge of the damn army!' He laid a fatherly hand on West's shoulder. 'Don't blame yourself. I know you did everything you could.'

West dared not look up. He wondered what Burr would have said had he known what really happened, out there in the cold wilderness. 'Have there been any other survivors?'

'A handful. No more than a handful, and a sorry one at that.' Burr burped, grimaced and rubbed at his gut. 'I must apologise. Damn indigestion simply will not go away. Food up here and all . . . ugh.' He burped again.

'Forgive me, sir, but what is our situation?'

'Right to business, eh, West? I always liked that about you. Right to business. Well, I'll be honest. When I received your letter we planned to head back south to cover Ostenhorn, but the weather has been dire and we've scarcely been able to move. The Northmen seem to be everywhere! Bethod may have had the bulk of his army near the Cumnur but he left enough up here to make things damned difficult for us. We've had constant raids against our lines of supply, more than one pointless and bloody skirmish, and a chaotic night-time action which almost caused full-scale panic in Kroy's division.'

Poulder and Kroy. Unpleasant memories began to crowd back into West's mind, and the simple physical discomforts of the journey north began to seem rather appealing. 'How are the Generals?'

Burr glared up from under his heavy eyebrows. 'Could you believe me if I said they were worse than ever? You can scarcely put the two in the same room without them starting to bicker. I have to have briefings with each on alternate days, so as to avoid fisticuffs in my headquarters. A ludicrous state of affairs!' He gripped his hands behind him as he strode grimly round the tent. 'But the damage they're doing pales compared to the damn cold. There are

men down with frostbite, with fever, with scurvy, the sick tents are brimming. For every man the enemy have killed we've lost twenty to the winter, and those still walking have got precious little stomach left for a fight. As for scouting, hah! Don't get me started!' He slapped angrily at the maps on the table. 'Charts of the land up here are all works of imagination. Useless, and we've barely any skilled scouts at all. Mist every day, and snow, and we can't see from one side of the camp to the other! Honestly, West, we've not the slightest idea where Bethod's main body is right now—'

'He's to the south, sir, perhaps two days' march behind us.'

Burr's brows went up. 'He is?'

'He is. Threetrees and his Northmen kept them under close watch as we moved, and even arranged a few unpleasant surprises for some of their outriders.'

'Like the one that they gave us, eh, West? Rope across the road and all that?' He chuckled to himself. 'Two days' march behind, you say? This is useful information. This is damn useful!' Burr winced and put one hand on his gut as he moved back to his table, picking up a ruler and starting to measure out distances. 'Two days' march. That would put him somewhere here. You're sure?'

'I'm sure, Lord Marshal.'

'If he's heading for Dunbrec, he'll pass near General Poulder's position. It might be that we can bring him to battle before he gets round us, perhaps even give him a surprise he won't forget. Well done, West, well done!' He tossed his ruler down. 'Now you should get some rest.'

'I'd rather get straight back into it, sir—'

'I know, and I could use you, but take a day or two in any case, the world won't end. You've come through quite an ordeal.'

West swallowed. He did feel terribly tired all of a sudden. 'Of course. I should write a letter . . . to my sister.' It was strange saying it. He had not thought about her for weeks. 'I should let her know that I'm . . . alive.'

'Good idea. I'll send for you, Colonel, when I need you.' And Burr turned away and hunched back over his charts.

'I won't forget that,' whispered Pike in West's ear as he lurched back through the flap into the cold.

'It's nothing. They won't miss either one of you at that camp. It's Sergeant Pike again, is all. You can put your mistakes behind you.'

'I won't forget it. I'm your man, now, Colonel, whatever happens. Your man!' West nodded as he made off, frowning, through the snow. War killed a lot of men, it seemed. But it gave a few a second chance.

West paused on the threshold. He could hear voices inside, chuckling. Old, familiar voices. They should have made him feel safe, warm, welcomed, but they did not. They worried him. Scared him, even. They, surely, would know. They would point and scream. 'Murderer! Traitor! Villain!' He turned back towards the cold. Snow was settling gently over the camp. The closest tents were black on the white ground, the ones behind grey. Further back they were soft ghosts, then only dim suggestions through the flurry of tiny flakes. No one

moved. All was quiet. He took a deep breath and pushed through the flap.

The three officers were sat around a flimsy folding table inside, pushed close up to a glowing stove. Jalenhorm's beard had grown to shovel-like proportions. Kaspas had a red scarf wrapped round his head. Brint was swaddled in a dark greatcoat, dealing cards out to the other two.

'Close that flap damn it, it's freezing out—' Jalenhorm's jaw dropped. 'No! It can't be! Colonel West!'

Brint leaped up as though he had been bitten on the arse. 'Shit!'

'I told you!' shouted Kaspas, flinging down his cards and grinning madly. 'I told you he'd be back!'

They surrounded him, clapping his back, squeezing his hands, pulling him into the tent. No manacles, no drawn swords, no accusations of treason. Jalenhorm conducted him to the best chair, meaning the one furthest from imminent collapse, while Kaspas breathed into a glass and wiped it clean with his finger and Brint pulled the cork from the bottle with a gentle thwop.

'When did you get here?'

'How did you get here?'

'Were you with Ladislas?'

'Were you at the battle?'

'Hold on,' said Jalenhorm, 'give him a minute!'

West waved him down. 'I got here this morning, and would have come to you at once apart from a crucial meeting with a bath and a razor, and then one with Marshal Burr. I was with Ladislas, at the battle, and I got here by walking across country, with the help of five Northmen, a girl, and a man with no face.' He took the glass and gulped down the contents in one go, winced and sucked his teeth as the spirit burned its way down into his stomach, already starting to feel glad that he decided to come in. 'Don't be shy,' he said as he held the empty glass out.

'Walking across country,' whispered Brint, shaking his head as he poured, 'with five Northmen. A girl, you say?'

'That's right.' West frowned, wondering what Cathil was doing right now. Wondering whether she needed help . . . foolishness, she could look after herself. 'You made it with my letter, then, Lieutenant?' he asked Jalenhorm.

'Some cold and nervous nights on the road,' grinned the big man, 'but I did.'

'Except that it's Captain now,' said Kaspas, sitting back on his stool.

'Is it indeed?'

Jalenhorm shrugged modestly. 'Thanks to you, really. The Lord Marshal put me on his staff when I got back.'

'Though *Captain* Jalenhorm still finds time to spend with us little people, bless him.' Brint licked his fingertips and started dealing four hands.

'I've no stake, I'm afraid,' muttered West.

Kaspas grinned. 'Don't worry, Colonel, we don't play for money any more. Without Luthar to make poor men of us all, it hardly seemed worth it.'

'He never turned up?'

'They just came and pulled him off the boat. Hoff sent for him. We've heard nothing since.'

'Friends in high places,' said Brint sourly. 'Probably swanning about in Adua on some easy detail, making free with the women while the rest of us are

freezing our arses off.'

'Though let's be honest,' threw in Jalenhorm, 'he made free enough with the women even when we were there.'

West frowned. That was all too unfortunately true.

Kaspa scraped his hand up off the table. 'So anyway, we're just playing for honour.'

'Though you'll not find much of that here,' quipped Brint. The other two burst out laughing and Kaspa dribbled booze into his beard. West raised his eyebrows. Clearly they were drunk, and the sooner he joined them the better. He swilled down the next glass and reached for the bottle.

'Well, I'll tell you one thing,' Jalenhorm was saying, sorting his cards with fumbling fingers, 'I'm glad as all hell that I won't have to tell your sister anything for you. I've scarcely slept in weeks for thinking through how I'd go about it, and I still haven't got a thought in my head.'

'You've never yet had a thought in your head,' said Brint, and the other two chortled away again. Even West managed a smile this time, but it didn't last long.

'How was the battle?' asked Jalenhorm.

West stared at his glass for a long moment. 'It was bad. The Northmen set a trap for Ladisla and he fell right into it, squandered his cavalry. Then a mist came up, all of a sudden, and you couldn't see the hand before your face. Their horse were on us before we knew what was happening. I took a knock on the head, I think. Next I remember I was in the mud on my back and there was a Northman bearing down on me. With this.' He slid the heavy sword out of his belt and laid it down on the table.

The three officers stared at it, spellbound. 'Bloody hell,' muttered Kaspa.

Brint's eyes were wide. 'How did you get the better of him?'

'I didn't. This girl I was telling you about . . .'

'Yes?'

'She smashed his brains out with a hammer. Saved my life.'

'Bloody hell,' muttered Kaspa.

'Phew,' Brint sat back heavily in his chair. 'Sounds like quite a woman!'

West was frowning, staring down at the glass in his hand. 'You could say that.' He remembered the feeling of Cathil sleeping beside him, her breath against his cheek. Quite a woman. 'You really could say that.' He drained his glass and stood up, stuck the Northman's sword back through his belt.

'You're going?' asked Brint.

'There's something I need to take care of.'

Jalenhorm stood up with him. 'I should thank you, Colonel. For sending me off with the letter. It sounds like you were right. There was nothing I could have done.'

'No.' West took a deep breath, and blew it out. 'There was nothing anyone could have done.'

The night was still, and crisp, and cold, and West's boots slipped and squelched in the half-frozen mud. Fires burned here and there and men clustered round them in the darkness, swaddled in all the clothes they

possessed, breath smoking, pinched faces lit in flickering yellow. One fire burned brighter than the others, up on a slope above the camp, and West made for that now, feet weaving from the drink. He saw two dark figures sitting near it, taking shape as he came closer.

Black Dow was having a pipe, chagga smoke curling out from his fierce grin, an open bottle wedged between his crossed legs, several empty ones scattered in the snow nearby. Somewhere away to the right, off in the darkness, West could hear someone singing in Northern. A huge, deep voice, and singing very badly. 'He cut him to the boooones. No. To the boooones. To the . . . wait on.'

'You alright?' asked West, holding his gloved hands out to the crackling flames.

Threetrees grinned happily up at him, wobbling slightly back and forward. West wondered if it was the first time he had seen the old warrior smile. He jerked a thumb down the hill. 'Tul's having a piss. And singing. I'm drunk as fucking shit.' He fell slowly backwards and crunched down into the snow, arms and legs spread out wide. 'And I been smoking. I'm soaked. I'm wet as the fucking Crinna. Where are we, Dow?'

Dow squinted across the fire, mouth wide open, like he was looking at something far away. 'Middle o' fucking nowhere,' he said, waving the pipe around. He started cackling, grabbed hold of Threetrees' boot and shook it. 'Where else would we be? You want this, Furious?' He thrust the pipe up at West.

'Alright.' He sucked on the stem, felt the smoke biting in his lungs. He coughed brown steam out into the frosty air, and sucked again.

'Give me that,' said Threetrees, sitting up and snatching the pipe off him.

Tul's great rumbling voice came floating up out of the darkness, horribly out of tune. 'He swung his axe like . . . what is it? He swung his axe like . . . shit. No. Hold on . . .'

'Do you know where Cathil is?' asked West.

Dow leered up at him. 'Oh, she's around.' He waved his hand toward a cluster of tents higher up the slope. 'Up that way, I reckon.'

'Around,' echoed Threetrees, chuckling softly. 'Around.'

'He was . . . the Bloody . . . Niiiiiine!' came gurgling from the trees.

West followed footprints off up the slope, towards the tents. The smoke was already having an effect on him. His head felt light, his feet moved easily. His nose didn't feel cold any more, just pleasantly tingling. He heard a woman's voice, laughing softly. He grinned, took a few more crunching steps through the snow towards the tents. Warm light spilled out from one, through a narrow gap in the cloth. The laughter grew louder.

'Uh . . . uh . . . uh . . .'

West frowned. That didn't sound like laughter. He came closer, doing his best to be quiet. Another sound wandered into his fuzzy mind. An intermittent growling, like some kind of animal. He edged closer still, bending down to peer through the gap, hardly daring even to breathe.

'Uh . . . uh . . . uh . . .'

He saw a woman's bare back, squirming up and down. A thin back, he could see the sinews bunching as she moved, the knobbles of her backbone shifting

under her skin. Closer still, and he could see her hair, shaggy brown and messy. Cathil. A pair of sinewy legs stuck out from under her towards West, one foot almost close enough for him to touch, its thick toes wriggling.

‘Uh . . . uh . . . uh . . .’

A hand slid up under her armpit, another round behind one knee. There was a low growl and the lovers, if you could call them that, rolled smoothly over so she was underneath. West’s mouth dropped open. He could see the side of the man’s head, and he stared at it. There was no mistaking the sharp, stubbly jaw line. The Dogman. His arse was sticking up towards West, moving in and out. Cathil’s hand clutched at one hairy buttock, squeezing at it in time to the movement.

‘Uh . . . Uh . . . Uh!’

West clamped one hand over his mouth, eyes bulging, half-horrified, half strangely aroused. He was caught hopelessly between wanting to watch, and wanting to run, and came down on the latter without thinking. He took a step back, his heel caught a tent peg and he went sprawling over with a stifled cry.

‘What the fuck?’ he heard from inside the tent. He scrambled up and turned away, started to flounder through the snow in the darkness as he heard the flap thrown back. ‘Which of you is it, you bastards?’ came Dogman’s voice from above, bellowing in Northern. ‘That you, Dow? I’ll fucking kill you!’

The High Places

‘The Broken Mountains,’ breathed Brother Longfoot, his voice hushed with awe. ‘Truly, a magnificent sight.’

‘I think I’d like it better if I didn’t have to climb ’em,’ grunted Logen.

Jezal by no means disagreed. The character of the land they rode through had been changing day by day, from softly sloping grassland, to gently rolling plains, to buckled hills spattered with bare rocks and sullen groups of stunted trees. Always in the distance had been the dim grey rumours of the mountain peaks, growing larger and more distinct with each morning until they seemed to pierce the brooding clouds themselves.

Now they sat in their very shadow. The long valley they had been following with its waving trees and winding stream ended at a maze of broken walls. Beyond it lay a steep rise into the rugged foothills, beyond them the first true outlier of the mountains rose, a stark outline of jagged rock, proud and magnificent, smeared at the distant top with white snow. A child’s vertiginous notion of what a mountain should be.

Bayaz swept the ruined foundations with his hard green eyes. ‘There was a strong fortress here. It marked the western limits of the Empire, before pioneers crossed the pass and settled the valleys on the far side.’ The place was nothing more now than a home for stinging weeds and scratching brambles. The Magus clambered from the cart and squatted down, stretching out his back and working his legs, grimacing all the while. He still looked old and ill, but a great deal of both flesh and colour had returned to his face since they left Aulus behind. ‘Here ends my rest,’ he sighed. ‘This cart has served us well, and the beasts too, but the pass will be too steep for horses.’

Jezal saw the track now, switching back and forth as it climbed, a faint line through the piles of wild grass and steep rock, lost over a ridge high above. ‘It looks a long way.’

Bayaz snorted. ‘But the first ascent of many we will make today, and there will be many more beyond them. We will be a week at least in the mountains, my boy, if all goes well.’ Jezal hardly dared ask what might happen if things went badly. ‘We must travel light. We have a long, steep road to follow. Water and all the food we have left. Warm clothes, for it will be bitter cold among the peaks.’

‘The birth of spring is perhaps not the best time to cross a mountain range,’ observed Longfoot under his breath.

Bayaz looked sharply sideways. ‘Some would say the best time to cross an obstacle is when one finds oneself on the wrong side of it! Or do you suggest we wait for summer?’ The Navigator chose, wisely in Jezal’s opinion, not to reply. ‘The pass is well-sheltered in the main, the weather should be far from our most pressing worry. We will need ropes, though. The road was good, in the Old Time, if narrow, but that was long ago. It might have been washed

away in places, or tumbled into deep valleys, who knows? We may have some tough climbing ahead of us.'

'I can hardly wait,' muttered Jezal.

'Then there is this.' The Magus pulled one of the nearly empty fodder sacks open, pushed the hay out of the way with his bony hands. The box they had taken from the House of the Maker lay in its bottom, a block of darkness among the pale, dry grass.

'And who gets the joy of carrying that bastard?' Logen looked up from under his brows. 'How about we draw lots? No?' No one said anything. The Northman grunted as he hooked his hands under it and dragged it off the cart towards him, its edge squealing against the wood. 'Reckon it's me, then,' he said, thick veins standing out from his neck as he hauled the weighty thing onto a blanket.

Jezal did not at all enjoy looking at it. It reminded him too much of the suffocating hallways of the Maker's House. Of Bayaz' dark stories about magic, and demons, and the Other Side. Of the fact that there was a purpose to this journey that he did not understand, but definitely did not like the sound of. He was glad when Logen finally had it wrapped up in blankets and stowed in a pack. Out of sight, at least, if not entirely out of mind.

They all had plenty to carry. Jezal took his steels, of course, sheathed at his belt. The clothes he wore: the least stained, torn and reeking he possessed, his ripped and battered, one-armed coat over the top. He had a spare shirt in his pack, a coil of rope above it, and half their stock of food on top of that. He almost wished that were heavier: they were down to their last box of biscuits, half a sack of oatmeal and a packet of salted fish that disgusted everyone except Quai. He rolled up a pair of blankets and belted them to the top of his pack, hung a full canteen at his waist, and was ready to go. As ready as he was going to get, anyway.

Quai unhitched the carthorses while Jezal stripped the saddles and harness from the other two. It seemed hardly fair, leaving them in the middle of nowhere after they had carried them all the way from Calcis. It felt like years ago to Jezal, thinking back. He was a different man now from the one who had set out from that city across the plain. He almost winced to remember his arrogance, and his ignorance, and his selfishness.

'Yah!' he shouted. His horse looked at him sadly without moving, then put its head down and began to nibble at the grass near his feet. He rubbed its back fondly. 'Well. I suppose they will find their way in time.'

'Or not,' grunted Ferro, drawing her sword.

'What are you—'

The curved blade chopped halfway through the neck of Jezal's horse, spattering warm, wet specks in his stricken face. Its front legs crumpled and it slid to the ground, toppled onto its side, blood gushing out into the grass.

Ferro grabbed hold of one of its hooves, hauled it towards her with one hand and started hacking the leg from the carcass with short, efficient blows while Jezal stared, his mouth open. She scowled up at him.

'I am not leaving all this meat for the birds. It will not keep long, but we will eat well enough tonight, at least. Get that sack.'

Logen flung one of the empty feed bags to her, and shrugged. 'You can't get

attached to things, Jezal. Not out here in the wild.'

No one spoke as they began to climb. They all were bent over and concentrating on the crumbling track beneath their shuffling feet. The path rose and turned back, rose and turned back time after time and soon Jezal's legs were aching, his shoulders were sore, his face was damp with sweat. One step at a time. That was what West used to tell him, when he was flagging on the long runs round the Agriont. One step at a time, and he had been right. Left foot, right foot, and up they went.

After a spell of this repetitive effort he stopped and looked down. It was amazing, how high they had climbed in so short a time. He could see the foundations of the ruined fortress, grey outlines in the green turf at the foot of the pass. Beyond it the rutted track led back through the crumpled hills towards Aulus. Jezal gave a sudden shudder and turned back towards the mountains. Better to leave all that behind him.

Logen slogged up the steep path, his worn boots scraping and crunching in the gravel and the dirt, the metal box in his pack a dead weight that dragged on his shoulders and seemed to get heavier with each step, that dug into his flesh like a bag of nails even though it was wrapped in blankets. But Logen was not so very bothered by it. He was too busy watching Ferro's arse move as she walked ahead of him, lean muscles squeezing with every step under the stained canvas of her trousers.

It was an odd thing. Before he'd fucked her he hadn't thought about her that way at all. He'd been too concerned with trying to stop her running off, or shooting him, or stabbing one of the others. So busy watching her scowl that he hadn't seen her face. So busy watching her hands that he'd never noticed the rest of her. Now he couldn't think about anything else.

Every movement of hers seemed fascinating. He'd catch himself watching her all the time. While they were on the move. While they were sitting down. While she was eating, or drinking, or talking, or spitting. While she was pulling her boots on in the morning or pulling them off at night. To make matters worse, his cock was halfway hard the whole time from watching her out of the corners of his eyes, and imagining her naked. It was getting to be quite an embarrassment.

'What are you looking at?' Logen stopped and gazed up into the sun. Ferro was frowning down at him. He stood and shifted the pack on his back, rubbing at his sore shoulders, wiping a sheen of sweat from his forehead. He could've thought up a lie, easily enough. He'd been watching the magnificent mountain peaks. He'd been watching where he put his feet. He'd been checking that her pack was on right. But what would've been the point? They both knew well enough what he'd been looking at, and the others had pushed on well out of earshot.

'I'm looking at your arse,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'Sorry, but it's a good one. No harm looking, is there?'

She opened her mouth angrily but he put his head down and trudged round her before she had the chance to speak, his thumbs hooked under the straps of his pack. When he'd got ten paces or so he looked over his shoulder. She was

still standing there, hands on her hips, frowning up at him. He grinned back.

‘What are you looking at?’ he said.

They stopped for water in the cold fresh morning, on a ledge above a plunging valley. Through spreading trees heavy with red berries growing sideways from the bare rock, Jezal could see white water surging in its narrow bottom. Dizzying cliffs rose on the far side, sheets of grey stone not far from sheer, ending in towering crags high above, where dark birds flapped and crowded to each other, while swirls of white cloud turned in the pale sky beyond. A spectacular setting, if somewhat unsettling.

‘Beautiful,’ murmured Jezal, but taking care not to get too close to the edge.

Logen nodded. ‘Reminds me of home. When I was a lad, I used to spend weeks at a time up in the High Places, testing myself against the mountains.’ He took a swallow from the flask then handed it to Jezal, staring up through narrowed eyes at the dark peaks. ‘They always win, though. This Empire’s come and gone, and here they still are, looking down on it all. Here they’ll still be, long after all of us have gone back to the mud. They looked down on my home.’ He gave a long snort, then spat phlegm over the edge of the valley. ‘Now they look down on nothing.’

Jezal took a swallow of water himself. ‘Will you go back to the North, after this?’

‘Maybe. I’ve some scores to settle. Some deep, hard scores.’ The Northman shrugged his shoulders. ‘But if I let ’em lie I daresay no one would be the worse off. I reckon they all think I’m dead, and no one’s anything but relieved about it.’

‘Nothing to go back to?’

Logen winced. ‘Nothing but more blood. My family’s long dead and rotted, and those friends I didn’t turn on and kill myself, I got killed with my pride and my stupidity. So much for my achievements. But you’ve still got time, eh, Jezal? A good chance at a nice, peaceful life. What will you do?’

‘Well . . . I’ve been thinking . . .’ he cleared his throat, suddenly nervous, as though giving voice to his plans made them far closer to reality. ‘There’s a girl back home . . . well, a woman, I suppose. My friend’s sister, in fact . . . her name is Ardee. I think that, perhaps, I love her . . .’ It was strange, that he was discussing his innermost feelings with this man he had thought a savage. With this man who could understand nothing of the delicate rules of life in the Union, of the sacrifice that Jezal was considering. But somehow it was easy to say. ‘I’ve been thinking . . . well . . . if she’ll have me, perhaps . . . we might marry.’

‘That sounds like a good plan.’ Logen grinned and nodded. ‘Marry her, and sow some seeds.’

Jezal raised his eyebrows. ‘I don’t know much about farming.’

The Northman spluttered with laughter. ‘Not those kind of seeds, boy!’ He clapped him on the arm. ‘One piece of advice, though, if you’ll take one from the likes of me, find something to do with your life that don’t involve killing.’ He bent and swung up his pack, shoved his arms through the straps. ‘Leave the fighting to those with less sense.’ And he turned and struggled up the track.

Jeza! nodded slowly to himself. He touched one hand to the scar on his chin, his tongue finding the hole in his teeth. Logen was right. Fighting was not the life for him. He already had one scar too many.



It was a bright day. The first time Ferro had been warm in a long while and the sun felt good, hot and angry on her face, on her bare forearms, on the backs of her hands. The shadows of rock and branch were laid out sharp on the stony ground, the spray from the falling water that flowed beside the old track flashed as it fell through the air.

The others had fallen behind. Longfoot, taking his time, smiling up at anything and everything, blathering on about the majesty of the views. Quai hunched up and dogged under the weight of his pack. Bayaz wincing and sweating, puffing as though he might fall dead at any minute. Luthar moaning about his blisters to anyone who would listen, which was no one. So it was only her and Ninefingers, striding up ahead in stony silence.

Just the way she liked it.

She scrambled over a lip of crumbling rock and came upon a dark pool, lapping at a crescent of flat stones, water hissing and splattering down into it over piled up rocks bearded with wet moss. A pair of twisted trees spread their branches out above, thin, fresh-budded leaves shimmering and rustling in the breeze. The sunlight sparkled, and insects skated and buzzed lazily on the rippling water.

A beautiful place, most likely, if you thought that way.

Ferro did not. 'Fish in there,' she murmured, licking her lips. A fish would be nice, stuck on a twig over a fire. The bits of horse they had carried with them were all gone, and she was hungry. She watched the vague shapes flicker under the shimmering water as she squatted down to fill up her canteen. Lots of fish. Ninefingers dumped his heavy pack and sat down on the rocks beside it, dragging his boots off. He rolled his trousers up above his knees. 'What are you doing, pink?'

He grinned at her. 'I'm going to tickle me some fish out of that pool.'

'With your hands? You got clever enough fingers for that?'

'I reckon you'd know.' She frowned at him but he only smiled the wider, skin creasing up round the corners of his eyes. 'Watch and learn, woman.' And he paddled out, bent over, lips pressed tight together with concentration, feeling gently around in the water.

'What's he up to?' Luthar dumped his pack down beside Ferro's and wiped his glistening face with the back of his hand.

'Fool thinks he can catch a fish.'

'What, with his hands?'

'Watch and learn, boy,' muttered Ninefingers. 'Aaaah . . .' His face broke out into a smile. 'And here she is.' The muscles in his forearm shifted as he worked his fingers under the water. 'Got it!' And he snatched his hand up in a shower of spray. Something flashed in the bright sun and he tossed it onto the bank beside them leaving a trail of dark wet spots on the dry stones. A fish, flipping

and jumping.

‘Hah hah!’ cried Longfoot, stepping up beside them. ‘Tricking fish out of the pool, is he? A most impressive and remarkable skill. I once met a man of the Thousand Isles who was reckoned the greatest fisherman in the Circle of the World. I do declare, he could sit upon the bank and sing, and the fish would jump into his lap. They would indeed!’ He frowned to find no one delighted by his tale, but now Bayaz was dragging himself over the lip, almost on hands and knees. His apprentice appeared behind him, face set hard.

The First of the Magi tottered down, leaning heavily on his staff, and fell back against a rock. ‘Perhaps . . . we should camp here.’ He gasped for breath, sweat running down his gaunt face. ‘You would never guess I once ran through this pass. I made it in two days.’ He let his staff drop from his trembling fingers and it clattered down amongst the dry grey driftwood near the water’s edge. ‘Long ago . . .’

‘I’ve been thinking . . .’ muttered Luthar.

Bayaz’ tired eyes swivelled sideways, as though even turning his head might prove too much of an effort. ‘Thinking and walking? Pray do not strain yourself, Captain Luthar.’

‘Why the edge of the World?’

The Magus frowned. ‘Not for the exercise, I assure you. What we seek is there.’

‘Yes, but why is it there?’

‘Uh,’ grunted Ferro in agreement. A good question.

Bayaz took a long breath and puffed out his cheeks. ‘Never any rest, eh? After the destruction of Aulcus, the fall of Glustrod, the three remaining sons of Euz met. Juvens, Bedesh, and Kanedias. They discussed what should be done . . . with the Seed.’

‘Have that!’ shouted Ninefingers, pulling another fish from the water and flinging it onto the stones beside the first. Bayaz watched it, expressionless, as it squirmed and flopped, mouth and gills gulping desperately at the suffocating air.

‘Kanedias desired to study it. He claimed he could turn it to righteous purposes. Juvens feared the stone, but knew of no way to destroy it, so he gave it into his brother’s keeping. Over long years though, as the wounds of the Empire failed to heal, he came to regret his decision. He worried that Kanedias, hungry for power, might break the First Law as Glustrod had done. He demanded the stone be put beyond use. At first the Maker refused, and the trust between the brothers dwindled. I know this, for I was the one who carried the messages between them. Even then, I learned since, they were preparing the weapons that they would one day use against each other. Juvens begged, then pleaded, then threatened, and eventually Kanedias relented. So the three sons of Euz journeyed to Shabulyan.’

‘No place more remote in the whole Circle of the World,’ muttered Longfoot.

‘That is why it was chosen. They gave up the Seed to the spirit of the island, to keep safe until the end of time.’

‘They commanded the spirit never to release it,’ murmured Quai.

‘My apprentice shows his ignorance again,’ returned Bayaz, glaring from under his bushy brows. ‘Not never, Master Quai. Juvens was wise enough to

know that he could not guess all outcomes. He realised that a desperate time might come, in some future age, when the power of . . . this thing might be needed. So Bedesh commanded the spirit to release it only to a man who carried Juvens' staff.'

Longfoot frowned. 'Then where is it?'

Bayaz pointed to the length of wood he used for a stick, lying on the ground beside him, rough and unadorned. 'That's it?' muttered Luthar, sounding more than a little disappointed.

'What did you expect, Captain?' Bayaz grinned sideways at him. 'Ten feet of polished gold, inlaid with runes of crystal, topped by a diamond the size of your head?' The Magus snorted. 'Even I have never seen a gem *that* big. A simple stick was good enough for my master. He needed nothing more. A length of wood does not by itself make a man wise, or noble, or powerful, any more than a length of steel does. Power comes from the flesh, my boy, and from the heart, and from the head. From the head most of all.'

'I love this pool!' cackled Ninefingers, tossing another fish out onto the rocks.

'Juvens,' murmured Longfoot softly, 'and his brothers, powerful beyond guessing, between men and gods. Even they feared this thing. They went to such pains to put it beyond use. Should we not fear it, as they did?'

Bayaz stared at Ferro, his eyes glittering, and she stared back. Beads of sweat stood from his wrinkled skin, darkened the hairs of his beard, but his face was flat as a closed door. 'Weapons are dangerous, to those who do not understand them. With Ferro Maljinn's bow I might shoot myself in the foot, if I did not know how to use it. With Captain Luthar's steel I might cut my ally, had I not the skill. The greater the weapon, the greater the danger. I have the proper respect for this thing, believe me, but to fight our enemies we need a powerful weapon indeed.'

Ferro frowned. She was yet to be convinced that her enemies and his were quite the same, but she would let it sleep, for now. She had come too far, and got too close, not to see this business through. She glanced over at Ninefingers and caught him staring at her. His eyes flicked away, back to the water. She frowned deeper. He was always looking at her lately. Staring, and grinning, and making bad jokes. And now she found herself looking at him more often than there was any need for. Patterns of light flowed across his face, reflected from the rippling water. He looked up again, and their eyes met, and he grinned at her, just for an instant.

Ferro's frown grew deeper yet. She pulled her knife out, snatched up one of the fish and took its head off, slit it open and flicked its slimy guts out, plopping down into the water next to Ninefingers' leg. It had been a mistake to fuck him, of course, but things had not turned out so very badly after all.

'Hah!' Ninefingers sent up another glittering spray of water, then he stumbled, clutching at the air. 'Ah!' The fish flapped from his hands, a streak of flipping brightness, and the Northman crashed into the water on his face. He came up spitting and shaking his head, hair plastered to his skull. 'Bastard!'

'Every man has, somewhere in the world, an adversary cleverer than himself.' Bayaz stretched out his legs in front of him. 'Could it be, Master

Ninefingers, that you have finally found yours?’

Jeza! woke with a start. It was the middle of the night. It took him a dizzy moment to remember where he was, for he had been dreaming of home, of the Agriont, of sunny days and barmy evenings. Of Ardee, or someone like her, smiling lop-sided at him in his cosy living room. Now the stars were scattered bright and stark across the black sky, and the chill, sharp air of the High Places nipped at Jeza!’s lips, and his nostrils, and the tips of his ears.

He was back up in the Broken Mountains, half the width of the world from Adua, and he felt a pang of loss. At least his stomach was full. Fish and biscuit, the first proper meal he’d eaten since the horse ran out. There was still warmth from the fire on the side of his face and he turned towards it, grinning at the glowing embers and dragging his blankets up under his chin. Happiness was nothing more than a fresh fish and a fire still alight.

He frowned. The blankets beside him, where Logen had been sleeping, were moving around. At first he took it for the Northman turning in his sleep, but they carried on moving, and did not stop. A slow, regular shifting, accompanied, Jeza! now realised, by a soft grunting sound. He had taken it at first for Bayaz’ snoring, but now he saw otherwise. Straining into the darkness he made out Ninefingers’ pale shoulder and arm, thick muscles straining. Under his arm, squeezing hard at his side, there was a dark-skinned hand.

Jeza!’s mouth hung open. Logen and Ferro, and from the sound of it there could be no doubt that they were coupling! What was more, not a stride from his head! He stared, watching the blankets bucking and shifting in the dim light from the fire. When had they . . . Why were they . . . How had they . . . It was a damned imposition is what it was! His old distaste for them flooded back in a moment and his scarred lip curled. A pair of savages, rutting in full view! He had half a mind to get up and kick them as you might kick a pair of dogs who had, to the general embarrassment of all, unexpectedly taken to each other at a garden party.

‘Shit,’ whispered a voice. Jeza! froze, wondering if one of them had seen him.

‘Hold on.’ There was a brief pause.

‘Ah . . . ah, that’s it.’ The repetitive movement started up again, the blankets flapping back and forward, slowly to begin with, then faster. How could they possibly have expected him to sleep through this? He scowled and rolled away, pulling his own covers over his head, and lay there in the darkness, listening to Ninefingers’ throaty grunting and Ferro’s urgent hissing growing steadily louder. He squeezed his eyes shut, and felt a sting of tears underneath his lids.

Damn it but he was lonely.

Coming Over

The road curved down from the west, down the bare white valley between two long ridges, all covered in dark pines. It met the river at the ford, the Whiteflow running high with meltwater, fast flowing over the rocks and full of spit and froth – earning its name alright.

‘So that’s it then,’ muttered Tul, lying on his belly and peering through the bushes.

‘I reckon,’ said Dogman, ‘less there’s another giant fortress anywhere on the river.’

From up here on the ridge the Dogman could see its shape clear, towering great walls of sheer dark stones, perfectly six sided, twelve strides high at the least, a massive round tower at each corner, the grey slate roofs of buildings round a courtyard in the midst. Just outside that there was a smaller wall, six sides again, half as high but still high enough, studded with a dozen smaller towers. One side backed to the river, the other five had a wide moat dug round them, so the whole thing was made an island of sharp stone. One bridge out to it, and one bridge only, stretching to a gatehouse the size of a hill.

‘Shit on that,’ said Dow. ‘You ever seen walls the like of those? How the hell did Bethod get in there?’

Dogman shook his head. ‘Don’t hardly matter how. He won’t fit his whole army in it.’

‘He won’t want to,’ said Threetrees. ‘Not Bethod. That’s not his way. He’d rather be outside, where he can move, waiting for his chance to catch ’em off guard.’

‘Uh,’ grunted Grim, nodding.

‘Fucking Union!’ cursed Dow. ‘They’re never on guard! All that time we followed Bethod up from the south and they bloody let him past without a fight! Now he’s all walled up here, close to food and water, nice and happy, waiting for us!’

Threetrees clicked his tongue. ‘No point crying ’bout it now, is there? Bethod got round you once or twice before, as I recall.’

‘Huh. Bastard’s got one hell of a knack for turning up where he ain’t wanted.’

Dogman looked down at the fortress, and the river behind, and the long valley, and the high ground on the other side, covered with trees. ‘He’ll have men up on the ridge opposite, and down there in those woods round the moat too, I shouldn’t wonder.’

‘Well you got it all figured, don’t you?’ said Dow, looking sideways. ‘There’s just one thing we still need to know. She suck your cock yet?’

‘What?’ said the Dogman, caught not knowing what to say. Tul spluttered with laughter. Threetrees started chuckling to himself. Even Grim made a kind of sound, like breath, but louder.

'Simple question ain't it?' asked Dow. 'Has she, or has she not, sucked it?'

Dogman frowned and hunched his shoulders. 'Shit on that.'

Tul could barely hold his giggling back. 'She did what to it? She shit on it? You was right, Dow, they don't do it the same down there in the Union!' Now they were all laughing, apart from the Dogman of course.

'Piss on the lot o' you,' he grunted. 'Maybe you should suck each other's. At least it might shut you up.'

Dow slapped him on the shoulder. 'Don't think so. You know how Tul is for talking with his mouth full!' Tul clamped his hand over his face and blew snot out of his nose, he was laughing so hard. Dogman gave him a look but that was like hoping a look would stop a rock falling. It didn't.

'Alright now, best be quiet,' muttered Threetrees, but still grinning. 'Someone better take a closer look. See if we can work out where Bethod's boys are all at before the Union come fumbling up that road like a pack o' fools.'

Dogman felt his heart sinking. 'One of us better? Which of you bastards is it going to be then?'

Black Dow grinned as he slapped him on the shoulder. 'I reckon whoever got to stick his twig in the fire last night should be the one to face the cold this morning, eh, lads?'

Dogman crept down through the trees, bow in one hand with a shaft nocked to it but the string not pulled back, for fear of letting it go by accident and shooting himself in the leg or some foolishness. He'd seen that happen before, and he'd no wish to be hopping back to the camp, trying to explain to the others how he got one of his own arrows through his foot. He'd never hear the end of it.

He knelt and peered through the trees, looked down at the ground – bare brown earth, and patches of white snow, and piles of wet pine needles, and . . . he stopped breathing. There was a footprint near him. Half in mud and half in snow. The snow was melting and falling, melting and falling off and on. A print wouldn't have lasted long today. That meant it was made recent. The Dogman sniffed the air. Not much to smell, but it was harder to smell anything in the cold – nose all pink and numb and full of cold snot. He crept the way the footprint was pointing, looking all round. He saw another, and another. Someone had come this way, no doubt, and not long ago.

'You're the Dogman, ain't you.'

He froze, heart thumping like big boots upstairs all of a sudden. He turned round, to look where the voice came from. There was a man sitting on a fallen tree ten strides away, lying back against a thick branch, hands clasped behind his head, stretched out like he was near asleep. He had long black hair hanging in his face, but one eye peered out at the Dogman, watchful. He sat forward, slowly.

'Now I'll leave these here,' he said, pointing at a heavy axe half-buried in the rotten trunk, and a round shield leaning near it. 'So you know I'm looking to talk, and I'll come on over. How's that sound to you?'

Dogman raised his bow and drew the string back. 'Come on over if you

must, but if you try more 'n talk I'll put an arrow through your neck.'

'Fair enough.' Long Hair rocked himself forward and slithered off the trunk, leaving his weapons behind, and came on through the trees. He walked with his head stooped over but he was a tall bastard still, holding his hands up in the air, palms out. All peaceful looking, no doubt, but the Dogman wasn't taking no chances. Peaceful-looking and peaceful are two different things.

'Might I say,' said the man as he came closer, 'in the interests of working up some trust between us, that you never saw me. If I'd had a bow I could've shot you where you stood.' It was a fair point, but the Dogman didn't like it any.

'You got a bow?'

'No I don't, as it goes.'

'There's your mistake, then,' he snapped. 'You can stop there.'

'I believe I will,' he said, standing a few strides distant.

'So I'm the Dogman, and you know it. Who might you be?'

'You remember Rattleneck, aye?'

'Of course, but you ain't him.'

'No. I'm his son.'

Dogman frowned, and drew his bowstring back a touch tighter. 'You'd best make your next answer a damn good one. Ninefingers killed Rattleneck's son.'

'That's true. I'm his other son.'

'But he was hardly more 'n a boy . . .' Dogman paused, counting the winters in his head. 'Shit. It's that long ago?'

'That long ago.'

'You've grown some.'

'That's what boys do.'

'You got a name now?'

'Shivers, they call me.'

'How come?'

He grinned. 'Because my enemies shiver with fear when they face me.'

'That so?'

'Not entirely.' He sighed. 'Might as well know now. First time I went out raiding, I got drunk and fell in the river having a piss. Current sucked my trousers off and dumped me half a mile downstream. I got back to the camp shivering worse than anyone had ever seen, fruits sucked right up into my belly and everything.' He scratched at his face. 'Bloody embarrassment all round. Made up for it in the fighting, though.'

'Really?'

'I got some blood on my fingers, over the years. Not compared to you, I daresay, but enough for men to follow me.'

'That so? How many?'

'Two score Carls, or thereabouts. They're not far away, but don't get nervous. Some o' my father's people, from way back, and a few newer. Good hands, each man.'

'Well, that's nice for you, to have a little crew. Been fighting for Bethod, have you?'

'Man needs some kind o' work. Don't mean we wouldn't take better. Can I put my hands down yet?'

'No, I like 'em there. What you doing out here in the woods alone, anyhow?'

Shivers pursed his lips, thoughtful. 'Don't take me for a madman, but I heard a rumour you got Rudd Threetrees over here.'

'That's a fact.'

'Is it now?'

'And Tul Duru Thunderhead, and Harding Grim, and Black Dow an' all.'

Shivers raised his brows, leaned back against a tree, hands still up, while Dogman watched him careful. 'Well that's some weighty company you got there, alright. There's twice the blood on you five than on my two score. Those are some names and no mistake. The sort of names men might want to follow.'

'You looking to follow?'

'Might be that I am.'

'And your Carls too?'

'Them too.'

It was tempting, the Dogman had to admit. Two score Carls, and they'd know where Bethod was at, maybe something of what he'd got planned. That'd save him some skulking around in the cold woods, and he was getting good and tired of wet trees. But he was a long way off trusting this tall bastard yet. He'd take him back to the camp, and Threetrees could weigh up what to do. 'Alright,' he said, 'we'll see. Why don't you step off up the hill there, and I'll follow on a few paces behind.'

'Alright,' said Shivers, turning and trudging up the slope, hands still up in the air, 'but watch what you do with that shaft, eh? I don't want to get stuck for you not looking where you're stepping.'

'Don't worry about me, big lad, the Dogman don't miss no—gah!'

His foot caught on a root and he lurched a step and fumbled his string. The arrow shot past Shivers' head and thudded wobbling into a tree just beyond. Dogman ended up on his knees in the dirt, looking up at him looming over, clutching an empty bow in one hand. 'Piss,' he muttered. If the man had wanted to, Dogman had no doubt he could have swung one of those big fists down and knocked his head off.

'Lucky you missed me,' said Shivers. 'Can I put my hands down now?'

Dow started as soon as they walked into the camp, of course. 'Who the hell's this bastard?' he snarled, striding straight up to Shivers and staring him out, bristling up to him with his axe clutched in his hand. It might have looked a touch comical, Dow being half a head shorter, but Shivers didn't seem much amused. Nor should he have.

'He's—' the Dogman started, but he didn't get any further.

'He's a tall bastard, eh? I ain't talking up to a bastard like him! Sit down, big lad!' and he threw his arm out and shoved Shivers over on his arse.

The Dogman thought he took it well, considering. He grunted when he hit the dirt, of course, then he blinked, then he propped himself on his elbows, grinning up at them. 'I reckon I'll just stay down here. Don't hold it against me though, eh? I didn't choose to be tall, any more than you chose to be an arsehole.'

Dogman winced at that, expecting Shivers to get a boot in the fruits for his

trouble, but Dow started to grin instead. 'Chose to be an arsehole, I like that. I like him. Who is he?'

'His name's Shivers,' said the Dogman. 'He's Rattleneck's son.'

Dow frowned. 'But didn't Ninefingers—'

'His other son.'

'But he'd be no more 'n a—'

'Work it out.'

Dow frowned, then shook his head. 'Shit. That long, eh?'

'He looks like Rattleneck,' came Tul's voice, his shadow falling across them.

'Bloody hell!' said Shivers. 'I thought you didn't like tall folk? It's two of you standing on top of each other ain't it?'

'Just the one.' Tul reached down and pulled him up by one arm like he was a child fell over. 'Sorry 'bout that greeting, friend. Those visitors we get we usually end up killing.'

'I'll hope to be the exception,' said Shivers, still gawping up at the Thunderhead. 'So that must be Harding Grim.'

'Uh,' said Grim, scarcely looking up from checking his shafts.

'And you're Threetrees?'

'That I am,' said the old boy, hands on his hips.

'Well,' muttered Shivers, rubbing at the back of his head. 'I feel like I'm in deep water now, and no mistake. Deep water. Tul Duru, and Black Dow, and . . . bloody hell. You're Threetrees, eh?'

'I'm him.'

'Well then. Shit. My father always said you was the best man left in all the North. That if he ever had to pick a man to follow, you'd be the one. 'Til you lost to the Bloody-Nine, o' course, but some things you can't help. Rudd Threetrees, right before me now . . .'

'Why've you come here, boy?'

Shivers seemed to have run out of words, so the Dogman spoke for him. 'He says he's got two score Carls following him, and they all want to come over.'

Threetrees looked Shivers in the eye for a while. 'Is that a fact?'

Shivers nodded. 'You knew my father. He thought the way you did, and I'm cut from his cloth. Serving Bethod sticks in my neck.'

'Might be I think a man should pick his chief and stick to him.'

'I always thought so,' said Shivers, 'but that blade cuts both ways, no? A chief should look out for his people too, shouldn't he?' Dogman nodded to himself. A fair point to his mind. 'Bethod don't care a shit for none of us no more, if he ever did. He don't listen to no one now but that witch of his.'

'Witch?' said Tul.

'Aye, this sorceress, this Caurib, or whatever. The witch. The one who makes the mist. Bethod's dabbling with some dark company. And this war, there's no purpose to it. Angland? Who wants it anyway, we got land aplenty. He'll lead us all back to the mud. Long as there was no one else to follow we stuck with it, but when we heard Rudd Threetrees might still be alive, and with the Union, well . . .'

'You decided to have a look, eh?'

'We've had enough. Bethod's got some strange boys along. These easterners, from out past the Crinna, bones and hides men, you know, hardly men at all.

Got no code, no mercy, don't hardly speak the same language we do. Fucking savages, the lot of 'em. Bethod's got some down in the Union fortress there, and they got all the bodies hung up on the walls, all cut with the bloody cross, guts hanging out, rotting. It ain't right. Then there's Calder and Scale tossing out orders like they know shit from porridge, like they got some names o' their own besides their father's.'

'Fucking Calder,' growled Tul, shaking his head.

'Fucking Scale,' hissed Dow, spitting on the wet ground.

'No bigger pair o' bastards in all the north,' said Shivers. 'And now I hear tell that Bethod's made a deal.'

'What kind of a deal?' asked Threetrees.

Shivers turned and spat over his shoulder. 'A deal with the fucking Shanka, that's what.'

Dogman stared. They all did. That was some evil kind of a rumour. 'With the Flatheads? How?'

'Who knows? Might be that witch found some way to talk to 'em. Times are changing, fast, and it ain't right, any of it. There's a lot of boys over there ain't happy. That's without getting started on that Feared.'

Dow frowned. 'Feared? I never heard of him.'

'Where you lot been? Under the ice?'

They all looked at each other. 'Pretty much,' said the Dogman. 'Pretty much.'

Cheap at the Price

‘You have a visitor, sir,’ muttered Barnam. His face, for some reason, was pale as death. ‘Clearly,’ snapped Glokta. ‘That was them knocking at the door, I assume.’ He dropped his spoon into his barely touched bowl of soup and licked sourly at his gums. *A particularly disgusting excuse for a meal, this evening. I miss Shickel’s cooking, if not her attempts to kill me.* ‘Well, who is it, man?’

‘It’s . . . er . . . it’s . . .’

Arch Lector Sult ducked through the low doorway so as not to disturb his flawless white hair on the frame. *Ah. I see.* He swept the cramped dining room with a scowl, lip wrinkled as though he had stumbled into an open sewer. ‘Don’t get up,’ he spat at Glokta. *I wasn’t planning to.*

Barnam swallowed. ‘Can I get your Eminence any—’

‘Get out!’ sneered Sult, and the old servant nearly fell over in his haste to make it to the door. The Arch Lector watched him go with withering scorn. *The good humour of our previous meeting seems a vaguely remembered dream.*

‘Damn peasants,’ he hissed as he slid in behind Glokta’s narrow dining table. ‘There’s been another uprising near Keln, and this bastard the Tanner was in the midst of it again. An unpopular eviction turned into a bloody riot. Lord Finster entirely misjudged the mood, got three of his guards killed and himself besieged in his manor by an angry mob, the halfwit. They couldn’t get in, fortunately, so they satisfied themselves with burning down half the village.’ He snorted. ‘Their own damn village! That’s what an idiot does when he gets angry. He destroys whatever’s nearest, even if it’s his own house! The Open Council are screaming for blood of course. Peasant blood, and lots of it. Now we have to get the Inquisition going down there, root out some ringleaders, or some fools who can be made to look like them. It should be Finster himself we’re hanging, the dolt, but that’s hardly an option.’

Glokta cleared his throat. ‘I will pack for Keln immediately.’ *Tickling the peasantry. Hardly my choice of task, but—*

‘No. I need you for something else. Dagoska has fallen.’

Glokta raised an eyebrow. *Not so great a surprise, though. Hardly enough of a shock, one would have thought, to squeeze such a figure as his Eminence into my narrow quarters.*

‘It seems the Gurmish were let in by a prior arrangement. Treason, of course, but at a time like that . . . hardly surprising. The Union forces were massacred, such as they were, but many of the mercenaries were merely enslaved, and the natives, by and large, were spared.’ *Gurmish mercy, who could have thought it? Miracles do happen, then.*

Sult flicked angrily at a speck of dust on one immaculate glove. ‘I hear that, when the Gurmish had broken into the citadel, General Vissbruck killed himself rather than be captured.’ *Well I never. I didn’t think he had it in him.* ‘He ordered his body burned, so as not to give the enemy any remains to defile,

then he cut his own throat. A brave man. A courageous statement. He will be honoured in Open Council tomorrow.'

How wonderful for him. A horrible death with honour is far preferable to a long life in obscurity, of course. 'Of course,' said Glokta quietly. 'A brave man.'

'That is not all. An envoy has arrived on the very heels of this news. An envoy from the Emperor of Gurkhul.'

'An envoy?'

'Indeed. Apparently seeking . . . peace.' The Arch Lector said the word with a sneer of contempt.

'Peace?'

'This room seems rather small for an echo.'

'Of course, your Eminence, but—'

'Why not? They have what they want. They have Dagoska, and there is nowhere further for them to go.'

'No, Arch Lector.' *Except, perhaps, across the sea . . .*

'Peace. It sticks in the craw to give anything away, but Dagoska was never worth much to us. Cost us more than we made from it, if anything. Nothing more than a trophy for the King. I daresay we're better off without it, the worthless rock.'

Glokta bowed his head. 'Absolutely, your Eminence.' *Although it makes one wonder why we bothered fighting for it.*

'Unfortunately, the loss of the place leaves you with nothing to be Superior of.' The Arch Lector looked almost pleased. *So it's back to plain old Inquisitor, eh? I suppose I'll no longer be welcome at the best social gatherings—* 'But I have decided to let you keep the title. As Superior of Adua.'

Glokta paused. *A considerable promotion, except that . . .* 'Surely, your Eminence, that is Superior Goyle's role.'

'It is. And will continue to be.'

'Then—'

'You will share the responsibilities. Goyle is the more experienced man, so he will be the senior partner, and continue running the department. For you I will find some tasks suited to your particular talents. I'm hoping that a little healthy competition will bring out the best in you both.'

More than likely it will end with one of us dead, and we can all guess who the favourite is. Sult gave a thin smile, as though he knew precisely what Glokta was thinking. 'Or perhaps it will simply demonstrate that one of you is *superior* to the other.' He barked a joyless laugh at his own joke, and Glokta gave a watery, toothless grin of his own.

'In the meantime, I need you to deal with this envoy. You seem to have a way of handling these Kantics, though you might avoid beheading this one, at least for the time being.' The Arch Lector allowed himself another minuscule smile. 'If he's after anything more than peace, I want you to sniff it out. If we can get anything more than peace from him, then of course, sniff that out too. It would do no harm if we could avoid looking like we got our backs whipped.'

He stood awkwardly and manoeuvred himself out from behind the table, all the while frowning as though the tightness of the room was an intentional affront to his dignity. 'And please, Glokta, find yourself some better quarters.'

A Superior of Adua, living like this? It's an embarrassment!'

Glokta humbly bowed his head, causing an unpleasant stinging right down to his tailbone. 'Of course, your Eminence.'

The Emperor's envoy was a thickset man with a heavy, black beard, a white skull-cap, and a white robe worked with golden thread. He rose and bowed humbly as Glokta hobbled over the threshold. *As earthy and humble-seeming as the last emissary I dealt with was airy and arrogant. A different kind of man, I suppose, for a different purpose.*

'Ah. Superior Glokta, I should have guessed.' His voice was deep and rich, his mastery of the common tongue predictably excellent. 'Many people on our side of the sea were very disappointed when your corpse was not among those found in the citadel of Dagoska.'

'I hope you will convey my sincere apologies to them.'

'I will do so. My name is Tulkis, and I am a councillor to Uthman-ul-Dosht, the Emperor of Gurkhul.' The envoy grinned, a crescent of strong white teeth in his black beard. 'I hope I fare better at your hands than the last emissary my people sent to you.'

Glokta paused. *A sense of humour? Most unexpected.* 'I suppose that would depend on the tone you take.'

'Of course. Shabbed al Islik Burai always was . . . confrontational. That, and his loyalties were . . . mixed.' Tulkis' grin grew wider. 'He was a passionate believer. A very religious man. A man closer perhaps to church, than to state? I honour God, of course.' And he touched his fingertips to his forehead. 'I honour the great and holy Prophet Khalul.' He touched his head again. 'But I serve . . .' And his eyes slid up to Glokta's. 'I serve only the Emperor.'

Interesting. 'I thought that in your nation, church and state spoke with one voice.'

'It has often been so, but there are those among us who believe that priests should concern themselves with prayer, and leave the governing to the Emperor and his advisors.'

'I see. And what might the Emperor wish to communicate to us?'

'The difficulty of capturing Dagoska has shocked the people. The priests had convinced them that the campaign would be easy, for God was with us, our cause was righteous, and so forth. God is great, of course,' and he looked up to the ceiling, 'but he is no substitute for good planning. The Emperor desires peace.'

Glokta sat silent for a moment. 'The great Uthman-ul-Dosht? The mighty? The merciless? Desires peace?'

The envoy took no offence. 'I am sure you understand that a reputation for ruthlessness can be useful. A great ruler, especially one of as wide and various a country as Gurkhul, must first be feared. He would desire to be loved also, but that is a luxury. Fear is essential. Whatever you may have heard, Uthman is neither a man of peace, nor of war. He is a man of . . . what would be your word? Necessity. He is a man of the right tool at the right time.'

'Very prudent,' muttered Glokta.

'Peace, now. Mercy. Compromise. These are the tools that suit his purposes,

even if they do not suit the purposes of . . . others,' and he touched his fingers to his forehead. 'And so he sends me, to find out if they suit you also.'

'Well, well, well. The mighty Uthman-ul-Dosht comes with mercy, and offers peace. These are strange times we live in, eh, Tulkis? Have the Gurkish learned to love their enemies? Or simply fear them?'

'One need not love one's enemy, or even fear him, to desire peace. One need only love oneself.'

'Is that so?'

'It is. I lost two sons in the wars between our peoples. One at Ulrioch in the last war. He was a priest, and burned in the temple there. The other died not long ago, at the siege of Dagoska. He led the charge when the first breach was made.'

Glokta frowned and stretched out his neck. *A hail of flatbow bolts. Tiny figures, falling in the rubble.* 'That was a brave charge.'

'War is harshest on the brave.'

'True. I am sorry for your losses.' *Though I feel no sorrow, in particular.*

'I thank you for your heartfelt condolences. God has seen fit to bless me with three more sons, but the spaces left by those two children lost will never close. It is almost like losing your own flesh. That is why I feel I understand something of what you have lost, in these same wars. I am sorry for those losses also.'

'Most kind.'

'We are leaders. War is what happens when we fail. Or are pushed into failure by the rash and the foolish. Victory is better than defeat, but . . . not by much. Therefore, the Emperor offers peace, in the hope that this may be a permanent end to the hostilities between our great nations. We have no true interest in crossing the seas to make war, and you have no true interest in toeholds on the Kantic continent. So we offer peace.'

'And is that all your offer?'

'All?'

'What will our people make of it, if we surrender Dagoska up to you, so dearly bought in the last war?'

'Let us be realistic. Your entanglements in the North put you at a considerable disadvantage. Dagoska is lost, I would put it from your mind.' Tulkis seemed to think about it for a moment. 'However, I could arrange for a dozen chests to be delivered, as reparations from my Emperor to your King. Chests of fragrant ebony wood, worked with golden leaf, carried by bowing slaves, preceded by humble officials of the Emperor's government.'

'And what would these chests contain?'

'Nothing.' They stared at each other across the room. 'Except pride. You could say they contained whatever you wished. A fortune in Gurkish gold, in Kantic jewels, in incense from beyond the desert. More than the value of Dagoska itself. Perhaps that would mollify your people.'

Glokta breathed in sharply, and let it out. 'Peace. And empty boxes.' His left leg had gone numb under the table and he grimaced as he moved it, hissed through his gums as he forced himself out of his chair. 'I will convey your offer to my superiors.'

He was just turning away when Tulkis held out his hand. Glokta looked at it

for a moment. *Well, where's the harm?* He reached out and squeezed it.
'I hope you will be able to persuade them,' said the Gurkish envoy.
So do I.

To the Edge of the World

On the morning of their ninth day in the mountains, Logen saw the sea. He dragged himself to the top of yet another painful scramble, and there it was. The track dropped steeply away into a stretch of low, flat country, and beyond was the shining line on the horizon. He could almost smell it, a salty tang on the air with each breath. He would have grinned if it hadn't reminded him of home so much.

'The sea,' he whispered.

'The ocean,' said Bayaz.

'We have crossed the western continent from shore to shore,' said Longfoot, grinning all the way across his face. 'We are close now.'

By afternoon they were closer still. The trail had widened to a muddy lane between fields, split up with ragged hedges. Mostly brown squares of turned earth, but some green with fresh grass, or with the sprouts of vegetables, some waving tall with a grey, tasteless-looking winter crop. Logen had never known much about farming, but it was plain enough that someone had been working this ground, and recently.

'What kind of people live all the way out here?' murmured Luthar, looking suspiciously out across the ill-tended fields.

'Descendants of the pioneers of long ago. When the Empire collapsed, they were left out here alone. Alone they have flourished, after a fashion.'

'You hear that?' hissed Ferro, her eyes narrowed, already fishing an arrow from her quiver. Logen put his head up, listening. A thumping sound, echoing from some distance, then a voice, thin on the wind. He put his hand on the grip of his sword and crouched down. He crept to an unruly stretch of hedge and peered over, Ferro beside him.

Two men were struggling with a tree stump in the midst of a turned field, one chopping at it with an axe, the other watching, hands on hips. Logen swallowed, uneasy. These two hardly looked much of a threat, but looks could lie. It had been a long time since they met a living thing that hadn't tried to kill them.

'Calm now,' muttered Bayaz. 'There is no danger here.'

Ferro frowned across at him. 'You've told us that before.'

'Kill no one until I tell you!' hissed the Magus, then called out in a language Logen didn't know, waving one arm over his head in a gesture of greeting. The two men jerked round, staring open-mouthed. Bayaz shouted again. The farmers looked at each other, then set down their tools and walked slowly over.

They stopped a few strides away. An ugly-looking pair, even to Logen's eye – short, stocky, rough-featured, dressed in colourless work clothes, patched and stained. They stared nervously at the six strangers, and at their weapons in particular, as though they'd never seen such people or such things before.

Bayaz spoke to them warmly, smiling and waving his arms, pointing out towards the ocean. One nodded, answered, shrugged and pointed down the track. He stepped through a gap in the hedge, off the field and into the road. Or from soft mud to hard mud, at least. He beckoned at them to follow while his companion watched suspiciously from the other side of the bushes.

‘He will take us to Cawneil,’ said Bayaz.

‘To who?’ muttered Logen, but the Magus did not answer. He was already striding westward after the farmer.

Heavy dusk under a grim sky, and they trudged through an empty town after their sullen guide. A singularly ill-favoured fellow, Jezal rather thought, but then peasants were rarely beauties in his experience, and he supposed that they were much the same the world over. The streets were dusty and deserted, weedy and scattered with refuse. Many houses were derelict, furry with moss and tangled with creeper. Those few that did show signs of occupation were, in the main, in a slovenly condition.

‘It would seem the glory of the past is faded here also,’ said Longfoot with some disappointment, ‘if indeed there ever was any.’

Bayaz nodded. ‘Glory is in short supply these days.’

A wide square opened out from the neglected houses. Ornamental gardens had been planted round the edge by some forgotten gardener, but the lawns were threadbare, the flowerbeds turned to briar-patches, the trees no more than withered claws. Out of this slow decay rose a huge and striking building, or more accurately a jumble of buildings of various confused shapes and styles. Three tall, round, tapering towers sprouted from their midst, joined at their bases but separating higher up. One was broken off before the summit, its roof long fallen in, leaving naked rafters exposed.

‘A library . . .’ whispered Logen under his breath.

It scarcely looked like one to Jezal. ‘It is?’

‘The Great Western Library,’ said Bayaz, as they crossed the dilapidated square in the looming shadow of those three crumbling towers. ‘Here I took my first hesitant steps along the path of Art. Here my master taught me the First Law. Taught it to me again and again until I could recite it flawlessly in every language known. This was a place of learning, and wonder, and great beauty.’

Longfoot sucked his teeth. ‘Time has not been kind to the place.’

‘Time is never kind.’

Their guide said a few short words and indicated a tall door covered in flaking green paint. Then he shuffled away, eyeing them all with the deepest suspicion.

‘You simply cannot get the help,’ observed the First of the Magi as he watched the farmer hurry off, then he raised his staff and struck the door three good knocks. There was a long silence.

‘Library?’ Jezal heard Ferro asking, evidently unfamiliar with the word.

‘For books,’ came Logen’s voice.

‘Books,’ she snorted. ‘Waste of fucking time.’

Vague sounds echoed from beyond the gate: someone approaching inside,

accompanied by an irritated muttering. Now locks clicked and grated and the weathered door squealed open. A man of an advanced age and a pronounced stoop gazed at them in wonder, an unintelligible curse frozen on his lips, a lighted taper casting a faint glow over one side of his wrinkled face.

'I am Bayaz, the First of the Magi, and I have business with Cawneil.' The servant continued to gawp. Jezal half expected a string of drool to escape from his toothless mouth it was hanging open so wide. Plainly, they did not receive large numbers of visitors.

The one flickering taper was pitifully inadequate to light the lofty hall beyond. Weighty tables sagged under tottering piles of books. Shelves rose up high on every wall, lost in the fusty darkness overhead. Shadows shifted over leather-bound spines of every size and colour, on bundles of loose parchments, on scrolls rolled and carelessly stacked in leaning pyramids. Light sparked and flashed on silver gilt, and gold ornamentation, and dull jewels set into tomes of daunting size. A long staircase, banister highly polished by the passage of countless hands, steps worn down in the centres by the passage of countless feet, curved gracefully down into the midst of this accumulation of ancient knowledge. Dust sat thickly on every surface. One particularly monstrous cobweb became stickily tangled in Jezal's hair as he passed over the threshold, and he flicked and wrestled at it, face wrinkled in distaste.

'The lady of the house,' wheezed the doorman in a strange accent, 'has already taken to her couch.'

'Then wake her,' snapped Bayaz. 'The hour grows dark and I am in haste. We have no time to—'

'Well. Well. Well.' A woman stood upon the steps. 'The hour grows dark indeed, when old lovers come calling at my door.' A deep voice, smooth as syrup. She sauntered down the stairs with exaggerated slowness, one set of long nails trailing on the curving banister. She seemed perhaps of middle age: tall, thin, graceful, a curtain of long black hair falling over half her face.

'Sister. We have urgent matters to discuss.'

'Ah, do we indeed?' The one eye that Jezal could see was large, dark and heavy-lidded, rimmed faintly with sore, tearful pink. Languorously, lazily, almost sleepily it flowed over the group. 'How atrociously tiresome.'

'I am weary, Cawneil, I need none of your games.'

'We all are weary, Bayaz. We all are terribly weary.' She gave a long, theatrical sigh as she finally glided to the foot of the steps and across the uneven floor towards them. 'There was a time when you were willing to play. You would play my games for days at a time, as I recall.'

'That was long ago. Things change.'

Her face twisted with a sudden and unsettling anger. 'Things rot, you mean! But still,' and her voice softened again to a deep whisper, 'we last remnants of the great order of Magi should at least try to remain civil. Come now, my brother, my friend, my sweet, there is no need for undue haste. The day grows late, and there is time for you all to wash away the dirt of the road, discard those stinking rags and dress for dinner. Then we can talk over food, as civilised persons are wont to do. I so rarely have guests to entertain.' She swept past Logen, looking him admiringly up and down. 'And you have brought me such rugged guests.' She lingered on Ferro with her eyes. 'Such

exotic guests.' Now she reached up and let a long finger trail across Jezal's cheek. 'Such comely guests!'

Jezal stood, rigid with embarrassment, entirely at a loss as to how to respond to this liberty. At close quarters her black hair was grey at the roots, no doubt heavily dyed. Her smooth skin seemed wrinkled and a touch yellow, no doubt heavily powdered. Her white gown was dirty round the hem, had a noticeable stain on one sleeve. She seemed as old as Bayaz looked, or perhaps older yet.

She peered into the corner where Quai was standing, and frowned. 'What manner of guest this is, I am not sure . . . but you are welcome all at the Great Western Library. Welcome all . . .'

Jezal blinked at the looking-glass, his razor hanging from one nerveless hand.

Only a few moments before he had been reflecting on the journey, now that it was finally approaching its end, and congratulating himself on how much he had learned. Tolerance and understanding, courage and self-sacrifice. How he had grown as a man. How much he had changed. Congratulations no longer seemed appropriate. The looking-glass might have been an antique, his reflection in it dark and distorted, but there could be no doubt that his face was a ruin.

The pleasing symmetry was gone forever. His perfect jaw was skewed round sharply to the left, heavier on one side than the other, his noble chin was twisted at a slovenly angle. The scar began on his top lip as no more than a faint line, but it split in two and gouged brutally into the bottom one, dragging it down and giving him the appearance of having a permanent and unsightly leer.

No effort on his part helped. Smiling made it far worse yet, exposing the ugly gaps in his teeth, more suited to a prize-fighter or a bandit than to an officer of the King's Own. The one mercy was that he would very likely die on the return journey, and no one of his old acquaintance would ever see him so horribly disfigured. A meagre consolation indeed.

A single tear plopped down into the basin under his face.

Then he swallowed, and he took a shuddering breath, and he wiped his wet cheek with the back of his forearm. He set his jaw, in its strange new configuration, and he gripped the razor tightly. The damage was done now, and there could be no going back. Perhaps he was an uglier man, but he was a better man too, and at least, as Logen would have said, he was still alive. He gave the razor a flourish and scraped the patchy, straggling hair from his cheeks, from before his ears, from his throat. On his lip, his chin, and around his mouth he left it be. The beard looked well on him, he rather thought, as he rubbed the razor dry. Or it went a meagre way towards hiding his disfigurement, at least.

He pulled on the clothes that had been left for him. A fusty-smelling shirt and breeches of an ancient and absurdly unfashionable design. He almost laughed at his ill-formed reflection when he was finally prepared for dinner. The carefree denizens of the Agriont would hardly have recognised him. He hardly recognised himself.

The evening repast was not all that Jezal might have hoped for at the table of an important historical figure. The silverware was tarnished in the extreme, the plate worn and cracked, the table itself slanted to the point that Jezal was constantly expecting the entire meal to slide off onto the dirty floor. Food was served by the shambling doorman, at no faster pace than he had answered the gate, each dish arriving colder and more congealed than the last. First came a sticky soup of surpassing tastelessness. Next was a piece of fish so overcooked it was little more than ashes, then most recently a slab of meat so undercooked as to be virtually still alive.

Bayaz and Cawneil ate in stony silence, staring at each other down the length of the table in a way which seemed calculated to make everyone uncomfortable. Quai did nothing more than pick at his food, his dark eyes flicking intently between the two elderly Magi. Longfoot stuck into every course with relish, smiling round at the company as though they were all enjoying themselves equally. Logen was holding his fork in his fist, frowning and stabbing clumsily at his plate as if it were a troublesome Shanka, the ballooning sleeves of his ill-fitting doublet trailing occasionally in his food. Jezal had little doubt that Ferro could have used the cutlery with great dexterity had she wished, but she chose instead to eat with her hands, staring aggressively at anyone who met her gaze as if daring them to tell her not to. She had on the same travel-stained clothes she had worn for the past week, and Jezal wondered for a moment if she had been provided with a dress to wear. He nearly choked on his dinner at the notion.

Neither the meal, nor the company, nor the surroundings were quite what Jezal would have chosen, but the fact was that they had largely run out of food a few days before. Rations in that space of time had included a handful of chalky roots dug from the mountainside by Logen, six tiny eggs stolen by Ferro from a high nest, and some berries of indescribable bitterness which Longfoot had plucked from a tree, apparently at random. Jezal would happily have eaten his plate. He frowned as he hacked at the gristly meat on it, wondering if the plate might indeed be a tastier option.

‘Is the ship still seaworthy?’ growled Bayaz. Everyone looked up. The first words to have been said in quite some time.

Cawneil’s dark eye regarded him coldly. ‘Do you mean that ship on which Juvens and his brothers sailed to Shabulyan?’

‘What other?’

‘Then no. It is not seaworthy. It is rotted to green mulch in its old dock. But do not fear. Another was built, and when that rotted also, another after it. The latest rocks on the tides, tethered to the shore, well-coated with weed and barnacle but kept always crewed and victualled. I have not forgotten my promise to our master. I marked well my obligations.’

Bayaz’ brows drew angrily down. ‘Meaning, I suppose, that I did not?’

‘I did not say so. If you hear a reproach it is your own guilt that goads you, not my accusation. I take no sides, you know that. I never have.’

‘You speak as though sloth were the greatest of virtues,’ muttered the First of the Magi.

‘Sometimes it is, if acting means taking part in your squabbles. You forget, Bayaz, that I have seen all this before, more than once, and a wearisome

pattern it seems to me. History repeats itself. Brother fights brother. As Juvens fought Glustrod, as Kanedias fought Juvens, so Bayaz struggles with Khalul. Smaller men in a bigger world, but with no less hatred, and no more mercy. Will this sordid rivalry end even as well as the others? Or will it be worse?’

Bayaz snorted. ‘Let us not pretend you care, or would drag yourself ten strides from your couch if you did.’

‘I do not care. I freely admit it. I was never like you or Khalul, or even like Zacharus or Yulwei. I have no endless ambition, no bottomless arrogance.’

‘No, indeed, not you.’ Bayaz sucked disgustedly at his gums and tossed his fork clattering down onto his plate. ‘Only endless vanity and bottomless idleness.’

‘Mine are small vices and small virtues. To see the world recast according to my own great designs has never interested me. I have always been content with the world as it is, and so I am a dwarf among giants.’ Her heavy-lidded eyes swept slowly over her guests, one by one. ‘And yet dwarves crush no one underfoot.’ Jezal coughed as her searching stare fell on him and gave careful attention to his rubbery meat. ‘Long is the list of those you have trodden over in pursuit of your ambitions, is it not, my love?’

Bayaz’ displeasure began to weigh on Jezal as heavily as a great stone. ‘You need not speak in riddles, sister,’ growled the old man. ‘I would have your meaning.’

‘Ah, I forgot. You are a straight talker, and cannot abide deception of any kind. You told me so just after you told me you would never leave me, and just before you left me to find another.’

‘That was not my choice. You wrong me, Cawneil.’

‘I wrong you?’ she hissed, and now her anger pressed hard at Jezal from the other side. ‘How, brother? Did you not leave? Did you not find another? Did you not steal from the Maker, first his secrets, then his daughter?’ Jezal squirmed and hunched his shoulders, feeling as squeezed as a nut in a vice. ‘Tolomei, do you remember her?’

Bayaz’ frown grew frostier yet. ‘I have made my mistakes, and still pay for them. Not a day passes that I do not think of her.’

‘How outrageously noble of you!’ sneered Cawneil. ‘No doubt she would swoon with gratitude, if she could hear you now! I think on that day too, now and then. The day the Old Time ended. How we gathered outside the House of the Maker, thirsty for vengeance. How we put forth all of our Art and all of our anger, and could not make a scratch upon the gates. How you whispered to Tolomei in the night, begging her to let you in.’ She pressed her withered hands to her chest. ‘Such tender words you used. Words I never dreamed were in you. Even an old cynic like me was moved. How could an innocent like Tolomei deny you, whether it was her father’s gates or her own legs she was opening? And what was her reward, eh, brother, for her sacrifices? For helping you, for trusting you, for loving you? It must have been quite the dramatic scene! The three of you, up on the roof. A foolish young woman, her jealous father, and her secret lover.’ She snorted bitter laughter. ‘Never a happy formula, but it can rarely have ended quite so badly. Father and daughter both. The long drop to the bridge!’

‘Kanedias had no mercy in him,’ growled Bayaz, ‘even for his own child.

Before my eyes he threw his daughter from the roof. We fought, and I cast him down in flames. So was our master avenged.'

'Oh, well done!' Cawneil clapped her hands in mock delight. 'Everyone loves a happy ending! Tell me only one thing more. What was it that made you weep so long for Tolomei, when I could never make you shed a tear? Did you decide you like your women pure, eh, brother?' And she fluttered her eyelashes in an ironical show, one strangely unsettling on that ancient face. 'Innocence? That most fleeting and worthless of virtues. One to which I have never laid claim.'

'Perhaps then, sister, the one thing you have never laid?'

'Oh, very good, my old love, very fine. It was always your ready wit that I enjoyed, above all else. Khalul was the more skilful lover, of course, but he never had your passion, nor your daring.' She speared a chunk of meat viciously with her fork. 'Travelling to the edge of the World, at your age? To steal that thing our master forbade? Courage indeed.'

Bayaz sneered his contempt down the table. 'What would you know of courage? You, who have loved no one in all these long years but yourself? Who have risked nothing, and given nothing, and made nothing? You, who have let all the gifts our master gave you rot! Keep your stories in the dust, sister. No one cares, and me least of all.'

The two Magi glared at each other in icy silence, the atmosphere heavy with their seething fury. The feet of Ninefingers' chair squealed gently as he edged it cautiously away from the table. Ferro sat opposite, her face locked in a frown of the deepest suspicion. Malacus Quai had his teeth bared, his fierce eyes fixed on his master. Jezal could only sit and hold his breath, hoping that the incomprehensible argument did not end with anyone on fire. Especially not him.

'Well,' ventured Brother Longfoot, 'I for one would like to thank our host for this excellent meal . . .' The two old Magi locked him simultaneously with their pitiless gazes. 'Now that we are close . . . to our final . . . destination . . . er . . .' And the Navigator swallowed and stared down at his plate. 'Never mind.'



Ferro sat naked, one leg drawn up against her chest, picking at a scab on her knee, and frowning.

She frowned at the heavy walls of the room, imagining the great weight of old stone all round her. She remembered frowning at the walls of her cell in Uthman's palace, pulling herself up to look through the tiny window, feeling the sun on her face and dreaming of being free. She remembered the chafing iron on her ankle, and the long thin chain, so much stronger than it had looked. She remembered struggling with it, and chewing on it, and dragging it after foot until the blood ran from her torn skin. She hated walls. For her, they had always been the jaws of a trap.

Ferro frowned at the bed. She hated beds, and couches, and cushions. Soft things make you soft, and she did not need them. She remembered lying in the

darkness on a soft bed when she was first made a slave. When she was still a child, and small, and weak. Lying in the darkness and weeping to be alone. Ferro dug savagely at the scab and felt blood seep from underneath. She hated that weak, foolish, child who had allowed herself to be trapped. She despised the memory of her.

Ferro frowned most of all at Ninefingers, lying on his back with the blankets rucked and rumpled round him, his head tipped back and his mouth hanging open, eyes closed, breath hissing soft in his nose, one pale arm flung out wide at an uncomfortable-looking angle. Sleeping like a child. Why had she fucked him? And why did she keep doing it? She should never have touched him. She should never have spoken to him. She did not need him, the ugly, big pink fool.

She needed no one.

Ferro told herself she hated all these things, and that her hatred could never fade. But however she curled her lip, and frowned, and picked her scabs, it was hard to feel the same. She looked at the bed, at the dark wood shining in the glow from the embers in the fireplace, at the shifting blobs of shadow in the wrinkled sheet. What difference would it really make to anyone, if she lay there rather than on the cold, wide mattress in her own room? The bed was not her enemy. So she got up from the chair, and padded over and slid down into it with her back to Ninefingers, taking care not to wake him. Not for his sake, of course.

But she had no wish to explain herself.

She wriggled her shoulders, moving backwards towards him where it was warmer. She heard him grunt in his sleep, felt him roll. She tensed to spring out of the bed, holding her breath. His arm slid over her side and he muttered something in her ear, meaningless sleep sounds, breath hot on her neck.

His big warm body pressed up tight against her back no longer made her feel so trapped. The weight of his pale hand resting gently against her ribs, his heavy arm around her felt almost . . . good. That made her frown.

Nothing good ever lasts for long.

And so she slid her hand over the back of his and felt his fingers, and the stump of the one that was missing, pressing into the spaces between hers, and she pretended that she was safe, and whole. Where was the harm? She held on to the hand tightly, and pressed it to her chest.

Because she knew it would not be for long.

Before the Storm

‘Welcome, gentlemen. General Poulder, General Kroy. Bethod has retreated as far as the Whiteflow, and it does not seem likely that he will find any more favourable ground on which to face us.’ Burr took a sharp breath, sweeping the gathering with a grave expression. ‘I think it very likely that there will be a battle tomorrow.’

‘Good show!’ shouted Poulder, slapping his thigh with great aplomb.

‘My men are ready,’ murmured Kroy, lifting his chin one regulation inch. The two generals, and the many members of their respective staffs, glowered at each other across the wide space of Burr’s tent, every man trying to outdo his opposite number with his boundless enthusiasm for combat. West felt his lip curling as he watched them. Two gangs of children in a schoolyard could scarcely have behaved with less maturity.

Burr raised his eyebrows and turned to his maps. ‘Luckily for us, the architects who built the fortress at Dunbrec also surveyed the surrounding land in some detail. We are blessed with highly accurate charts. Furthermore, a group of Northmen have recently defected to our cause, bringing with them detailed information on Bethod’s forces, position, and intentions.’

‘Why should we believe the word of a pack of Northern dogs,’ sneered General Kroy, ‘who have no loyalty even to their own king?’

‘Had Prince Ladisla been more willing to listen to them, sir,’ intoned West, ‘he might still be with us. As might his division.’ General Poulder chuckled heartily to himself and his staff joined him. Kroy, predictably, was less amused. He shot a deadly glare across the tent, one which West returned with an icy blankness.

Burr cleared his throat, and soldiered on. ‘Bethod holds the fortress of Dunbrec.’ The point of his stick tapped at the black hexagon. ‘Positioned to cover the only significant road out of Angland, where it fords the river Whiteflow, our border with the North. The road approaches the fortress from the west, cutting eastwards down a wide valley between two wooded ridges. The body of Bethod’s forces are encamped near the fortress, but he means to mount an attack, westward up the road, as soon as we show our faces.’ And Burr’s stick slashed along the dark line, swishing against the heavy paper. ‘The valley through which the road passes is bare, open grass with some gorse and rocky outcroppings, and will give him ample room for manoeuvre.’ He turned back to the assembled officers, stick clenched tight, and placed his fists firmly on the table before him. ‘I mean to fall into his trap. Or at least . . . to seem to. General Kroy?’

Kroy finally broke off glowering at West to reply with a sullen, ‘Yes, Lord Marshal?’

‘Your division is to deploy astride the road and push steadily eastwards towards the fortress, encouraging Bethod to launch his attack. Slowly and

steadily, with no heroics. General Poulder's division, meanwhile, will have worked its way through the trees on top of the northern ridge, here,' and his stick tapped at the green blocks of the wooded high ground, 'just forward of General Kroy's position.'

'Just forward of General Kroy's position,' grinned Poulder, as though he was being shown special favour. Kroy scowled with disgust.

'Just forward, yes,' continued Burr. 'When Bethod's forces are entirely occupied in the valley, it shall be your task to attack them from above, and take them in the flank. It is important that you wait until the Northmen have been fully engaged, General Poulder, so that we can surround them, overwhelm them, and hope to bag the majority at one throw. If they are allowed to retire to the fords the fortress will cover their retreat, and we will be unable to pursue. Reducing Dunbrec might take us months.'

'Of course, my Lord Marshal,' exclaimed Poulder, 'my division will wait until the last moment, you may depend upon it!'

Kroy snorted. 'That should present no difficulty. Arriving late is a specialty of yours, I understand. There would be no need for a battle if you had intercepted the Northmen last week, rather than allowing them to get around you!'

Poulder bristled. 'Easy for you to say, while you were sitting on the right wing doing nothing! It's fortunate they didn't pass by in the night! You might have taken their retreat for an assault and fled with your entire division!'

'Gentlemen, please!' roared Burr, smashing the table with his stick. 'There will be fighting enough for every man in the army, that I promise you, and if each man does his part there will be ample glory too! We must work together if this plan is to bear fruit!' He burped and grimaced and licked his lips sourly, while the two Generals and their staffs glowered at one another. West would almost have laughed, had men's lives not hung in the balance, his own among them.

'General Kroy,' said Burr, in the tone of a parent addressing a wayward child. 'I wish to make sure that you understand your orders.'

'To deploy my division in line astride the road,' hissed Kroy, 'and to advance slowly and in good order, eastwards down the valley towards Dunbrec, drawing Bethod and his savages into an engagement.'

'Indeed. General Poulder?'

'To move my division out of sight through the trees, just ahead of General Kroy's regiments, so that at the last moment I can charge down on the Northern scum and take them in the flank.'

Burr managed a smile. 'Correct.'

'An excellent plan, Lord Marshal, if I may!' Poulder tugged happily at his moustaches. 'You can depend upon it that my horse will cut them to pieces. To! Pieces!'

'I am afraid you will not have any cavalry, General,' said West in an emotionless monotone. 'The woods are dense and horse will be useless to you there. They might even alert the Northmen to your presence. A risk we cannot take.'

'But . . . my cavalry,' muttered Poulder, stricken with woe. 'My best regiments!'

'They will be kept here, sir,' droned West, 'near Marshal Burr's headquarters, and under his direct control, as a reserve. They will be deployed if they are needed.' Now it was Poulder's fury he met with a stonewall stare, while the faces of Kroy and his staff broke out in broad, neat, utterly joyless smiles.

'I hardly think—' hissed Poulder.

Burr cut him off. 'That is my decision. There is one last point that you should all bear in mind. There are some reports that Bethod has called on reinforcements. Some manner of wild men, savages from across the mountains to the north. Keep your eyes open and your flanks well screened. You will receive word from me tomorrow when it is time to move, most likely before first light. That is all.'

'Can we really rely on them to do what they are told?' muttered West as he watched the two surly groups file from the tent.

'What choice do we have?' The Marshal threw himself into a chair with a grimace and rested his hands on his belly, frowning up at the great map. 'I wouldn't worry. Kroy has no option but to move down the valley and fight.'

'What about Poulder? I wouldn't put it past him to find some excuse to stay sitting in the woods.'

The Lord Marshal grinned as he shook his head. 'And leave Kroy to do all the fighting? What if he were to beat the Northmen on his own, and take all the glory for himself? No. Poulder could never risk that. This plan gives them no choice but to work together.' He paused, looking up at West. 'You might want to treat the pair of them with a touch more respect.'

'Do you think they deserve it, sir?'

'Of course not. But if, for instance, we should lose tomorrow, one of them will most likely step into my boots. Then where will you be?'

West grinned. 'I'll be finished, sir. But my being polite now won't change that. They hate me for what I am, not what I say. I might as well say what I please while I can.'

'I suppose you might at that. They're a damn nuisance, but their folly can be predicted. It's Bethod that worries me. Will he do what we want him to?' Burr burped, and swallowed, and burped again. 'Damn this damn indigestion!'

Threetrees and the Dogman were sprawled on a bench outside the tent flap, an odd pair in amongst the well-starved press of officers and guards.

'Smells like battle to me,' said Threetrees as West strode up to them.

'Indeed.' West pointed after Kroy's black-uniformed staff. 'Half the army are going down the valley tomorrow morning, hoping to draw Bethod into a fight.' He pointed to Poulder's crimson entourage. 'The other half are going up into the trees, and hope to surprise them before they can get away.'

Threetrees nodded slowly to himself. 'Sounds like a good plan.'

'Nice and simple,' said the Dogman. West winced. He could hardly bear to look at the man.

'We'd have no plan at all if you hadn't brought us that information,' he managed to say through gritted teeth. 'Are you sure we can trust it?'

'Sure as we can be,' said Threetrees.

Dogman grinned. 'Shivers is alright, and from what I've scouted up, I reckon it's true. No promises, course.'

‘Of course not. You deserve a rest.’

‘We wouldn’t say no.’

‘I’ve arranged a position for you up at the far left of the line, at the end of General Poulder’s division, up in the trees, on the high ground. You should be well out of the action there. The safest place in the whole army tomorrow, I shouldn’t wonder. Dig in and make yourself a fire, and if things go right, we’ll talk again over Bethod’s dead body.’ And he held out his hand.

Threetrees grinned as he took it. ‘Now that’s our kind of language, Furious. You take care, now.’ He and the Dogman started to trudge away up the slope towards the tree line.

‘Colonel West?’

He knew who it was before he turned. There weren’t many women in the camp that would have had much to say to him. Cathil, standing in the slush, a borrowed coat wrapped round her. She looked somewhat furtive, somewhat shamefaced, but the sight of her still somehow brought up a sudden surge of anger and embarrassment.

It was unfair, he knew. He had no rights over her. It was unfair, but that only made it worse. All he could think of was the side of the Dogman’s face and her grunting, uh . . . uh . . . uh. So horribly surprising. So horribly disappointing. ‘You’d better go with them,’ said West with an icy formality, scarcely able to bring himself to say anything at all. ‘Safest place.’ He turned away but she brought him up short.

‘It was you, wasn’t it, outside the tent . . . the other night?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid it was. I simply came to check if there was anything you needed,’ he lied. ‘I really had no idea . . . who you would be with.’

‘I certainly never meant for you to—’

‘The Dogman?’ he muttered, face suddenly crunching up with incomprehension. ‘Him? I mean . . . why?’ Why him instead of me, was what he wanted to say, but he managed to stop himself.

‘I know . . . I know you must think—’

‘You’ve no need to explain yourself to me!’ he hissed, though he knew he’d just asked her to. ‘Who cares what I think?’ He spat it out with a deal more venom than he had intended, but his own loss of control only made him angrier, and he lost more. ‘I don’t care what you choose to fuck!’

She winced and stared down at the ground beside his feet. ‘I didn’t mean to . . . well. I owe you a lot, I know. It’s just that . . . you’re too angry for me. That’s all.’

West stared at her as she trudged off up the hill after the Northmen, hardly able to believe his ears. She was happy to bed that stinking savage, but *he* was too angry? It was so unfair he almost choked on his rage.

Questions

Colonel Glokta charged into his dining room in a tremendous hurry, wrestling manfully with the buckle on his sword belt. 'Damn it!' he fumed. He was all thumbs. Couldn't get the thing closed. 'Damn it, damn it!'

'You need some help with that?' asked Shickel, sitting wedged in behind the table, black burns across her shoulders, cuts hanging open, dry as meat in the butcher's shop.

'No I do not need bloody help!' he shrieked, flinging his belt onto the floor. 'What I need is for someone to explain what the hell is going on here! This is a disgrace! I will not have members of my regiment sitting around naked! Especially with such unsightly wounds! Where is your uniform, girl?'

'I thought you were more worried about the Prophet.'

'Never mind about him!' snapped Glokta, worming his way onto the bench opposite her. 'What about Bayaz? What about the First of the Magi? Who is he? What's he really after, the old bastard?'

Shickel smiled a sweet smile. 'Oh, that. I thought everyone knew that. The answer is . . .'

'Yes!' muttered the Colonel, mouth dry, eager as a schoolboy, 'The answer is?'

She laughed, and slapped at the bench beside her. *Thump, thump, thump.*

'The answer is . . .'

The answer is . . .

Thump, thump, thump. Glokta's eyes snapped open. It was still half dark outside. Only a faint glow was coming through the curtains. *Who comes belting at the door at this hour? Good news comes in the daylight.*

Thump, thump, thump. 'Yes, yes!' he screeched. 'I'm crippled, not deaf! I damn well hear you!'

'Then open the bloody door!' The voice came muffled from the corridor, but there was no mistaking the Styrian note. *Vitari, the bitch. Just what one needs in the middle of the night.* Glokta did his best to stifle his groans as he carefully disentangled his numb limbs from his sweaty blanket, rolling his head gently from side to side, trying to stretch some movement into his twisted neck, and failing.

Thump, thump. *I wonder, when was the last time I had a woman beating down my bedroom door?* He snatched his cane from its place, resting against the mattress, then pressed one of his few teeth hard into his lip, grunting softly to himself as he wormed his way down the bed and let one leg flop off onto the boards. He threw himself forward, eyes squeezed shut at a withering pain through his back, and finally reached sitting, gasping as though he had run ten miles. *Fear me, fear me, all must fear me! If I can just get out of bed, that is.*

Thump. 'I'm coming, damn it!' He footed his cane on the floor and rocked himself up to standing. *Careful, careful.* The muscles in his mutilated left leg were shaking violently, making his toeless foot twitch and flop like a dying fish. *Damn this hideous appendage! It would feel like someone else's, if it didn't hurt so much. But calm, calm, we must be gentle.*

'Shhh,' he hissed, like a parent trying to sooth a wailing child, kneading softly at his ruined flesh and trying to breathe slow. 'Shhh.' The convulsions slowly calmed to a more manageable trembling. *About the best that we can hope for, I fear.* He was able to pull his nightshirt down and shuffle to the door, flip the key angrily round in the lock, and pull it open. Vitari stood outside in the corridor, draped against the wall, a darker shape in the shadows.

'You,' he grunted, hopping to the chair. 'You just can't stay away, can you? What is your fascination with my bedchamber?'

She sauntered through the door, peering around scornfully at the miserable room. 'Perhaps I just like seeing you in pain.'

Glokta snorted, rubbing gingerly at his burning knee. 'Then you must be wet between the legs right now.'

'Surprisingly, no. You look like death.'

'When don't I? Did you come to mock my looks, or have we some business?'

Vitari folded her long arms and leaned against the wall. 'You need to get dressed.'

'More excuses to see me naked?'

'Sult wants you.'

'Now?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Oh no, we can take our time. You know how he is.'

'Where are we going?'

'You'll see when we get there.' And she upped her pace, making him gasp and wince, snorting his aching way through the dim archways, down the shadowy lanes and the grey court-yards of the Agriont, colourless in the thin light of early morning.

His clumsy boots crunched and scraped in the gravel of the park. The grass was heavy with cold dew, the air thick with dull mist. Trees loomed up, black and leafless claws in the murk, and then a towering, sheer wall. Vitari led him towards a high gate, flanked by two guards. Their heavy armour was worked with gold, their heavy halberds were studded with gold, the golden sun of the Union was stitched into their surcoats. *Knights of the Body. The King's personal guard.*

'The palace?' muttered Glokta.

'No, the slums, genius.'

'Halt.' One of the two knights raised his gauntleted hand, voice echoing slightly from the grill in his tall helmet. 'State your names and business.'

'Superior Glokta.' He hobbled to the wall and leaned against the damp stones, pressing his tongue into his empty gums against the pain in his leg. 'As for the business, ask her. This wasn't my idea, I can damn well tell you that.'

'Practical Vitari. And the Arch Lector is expecting us. You know that already, fool, I told you on the way out.'

If it were possible for a man in full armour to appear hurt, this one did. 'It is a matter of protocol that I ask everyone—'

'Just get it open!' barked Glokta, pressing his fist into his trembling thigh, 'while I can still lurch through on my own!'

The man thumped angrily on the gate and a small door opened inside it. Vitari ducked through and Glokta limped after her, along a path of carefully-cut stones through a shadowy garden. Drops of cold water clung to the budding branches, dripped from the towering statuary. The cawing of a crow somewhere out of sight seemed ridiculously loud in the morning stillness. The palace loomed up ahead of them, a confusion of roofs, towers, sculptures, ornamental stonework outlined against the first pale glow of morning.

'What are we doing here?' hissed Glokta.

'You'll find out.'

He limped up a step, between towering columns and two more Knights of the Body, still and silent enough to have been empty suits of armour. His cane clicked on the polished marble floor of an echoing hallway, half lit by flickering candles, the high walls covered entirely with dim friezes. Scenes of forgotten victories and achievements, one king after another pointing, brandishing weapons, reading proclamations, standing with their chests puffed out in pride. He struggled up a flight of steps, ceiling and walls carved entirely in a glorious pattern of golden flowers, flashing and glittering in the candlelight, while Vitari waited impatiently for him at the top. *Their being priceless doesn't make them any easier to climb, damn it.*

'Down there,' she muttered at him.

A worried-looking group were gathered round a door twenty strides away. A Knight of the Body sat bent over on a chair, his helmet on the floor beside him, his head in his hands, fingers pushed through curly hair. Three other men stood, huddled together, their urgent whispering rebounding from the walls and echoing down the hallway.

'Aren't you coming?'

Vitari shook her head. 'He didn't ask for me.'

The three men looked up at Glokta as he limped towards them. *And what a group to find muttering in a palace corridor before daybreak.* Lord Chamberlain Hoff was wearing a quickly flung on nightgown, his puffy face stricken as though by a nightmare. Lord Marshal Varuz had one collar of his rumpled shirt sticking up, the other down, his iron grey hair shooting off his skull at all angles. High Justice Marovia's cheeks were gaunt, his eyes were rimmed with red, and there was a slight tremble to his liverish hand as he raised it to point at the door.

'In there,' he whispered. 'A terrible business. Terrible. Whatever shall be done?'

Glokta frowned, stepped past the sobbing guard and limped over the threshold.

It was a bedchamber. *And a magnificent one. This is a palace, after all.* The walls were papered with vivid silk, hung with dark canvases in old gilt frames. An enormous fireplace was carved from brown and red stone to look like a miniature Kantic temple. The bed was a monstrous four-posted creation whose curtains probably enclosed more space than Glokta's entire bedroom. The

covers were flung back and rumpled, but there was no sign of the former occupant. One tall window was standing ajar, and a chill breeze washed in from the grey world outside, making the flames on the candles dance and flutter.

Arch Lector Sult was standing near the centre of the room, frowning thoughtfully down at the floor on the other side of the bed. If Glokta had expected him to be as dishevelled as his three colleagues outside the door, he was disappointed. His white gown was spotless, his white hair neatly brushed, his white gloved hands clasped carefully before him.

‘Your Eminence . . .’ Glokta was saying as he shuffled up. Then he noticed something on the floor. Dark fluid, glistening black in the candlelight. *Blood. How very unsurprising.*

He hobbled a little further. The corpse lay on its back on the far side of the bed. Blood was spattered on the white sheets, smeared over the boards and across the wall behind, had soaked up into the hem of the opulent drapes by the window. The ripped nightshirt was soaked through with it. One hand was curled up, the other was torn off, ragged, just beyond the thumb. There was a gaping wound on one arm, a chunk of flesh missing. *As though it were bitten away.* One leg was broken and bent back on itself, a snapped off length of bone poking through split flesh. The throat had been so badly mauled that the head was barely attached, but there was no mistaking the face, seeming to grin up at the fine stucco work on the ceiling, teeth bared, eyes wide, bulging open.

‘Crown Prince Raynault has been murdered,’ muttered Glokta.

The Arch Lector raised his gloved hands and slowly, softly clapped two fingertips against his palm. ‘Oh, very good. It is for just such insights that I sent for you. Yes, Prince Raynault has been murdered. A tragedy. An outrage. A terrible crime that strikes at the very heart of our nation, and at every one of its people. But that is far from the worst of it.’ The Arch Lector took a long breath. ‘The King has no siblings, Glokta, do you understand? Now he has no heirs. When the king dies, where do you suppose our next illustrious ruler will come from?’

Glokta swallowed. *I see. What a towering inconvenience.* ‘From the Open Council.’

‘An election,’ sneered Sult. ‘The Open Council, voting for our next king. A few hundred self-serving halfwits who can’t be trusted to vote for their own lunch without guidance.’

Glokta swallowed. *I would almost be enjoying his Eminence’s discomfort, were my neck not on the block beside his.* ‘We are not popular with the Open Council.’

‘We are reviled by them. Few more so. Our actions against the Mercers, against the Spicers, against Lord Governor Vurms, and more besides. None of the nobles trust us.’

Then if the king dies . . . ‘How is the king’s health?’

‘Not. Good.’ Sult frowned down at the bloody remains. ‘All our work could be undone at this one stroke. Unless we can make friends in the Open Council, Glokta, while the king yet lives. Unless we can curry enough favour to choose his successor, or at least to influence the choice.’ He stared at Glokta, blue eyes glittering in the candlelight. ‘Votes must be bought, and blackmailed,

coaxed and threatened our way. And you can depend upon it that those three old bastards outside are thinking just the same thing. How will I stay in power? With which candidate should I align myself? Whose votes can I control? When we announce the murder, we must assure the Open Council that the killer is already in our hands. Then swift, and brutal, and highly visible justice must be done. If the vote does not go our way, who knows what we could end up with? Brock on the throne, or Isher, or Heugen?’ Sult gave a horrified shudder. ‘We will be out of our jobs, at best. At worst . . .’ *Several bodies found floating by the docks . . .* ‘That is why I need you to find me the Prince’s murderer. Now.’

Glokta looked down at the body. *Or what remains of it.* He poked at the gouge out of Raynault’s arm with the tip of his cane. *We have seen wounds like these before, on that corpse in the park, months ago. An Eater did this, or at least, we are meant to think so.* The window tapped gently against its frame on a sudden cold draft. *An Eater who climbed in through the window? Unlike one of the Prophet’s agents to leave such clues behind. Why not simply vanished, like Davoust? A sudden loss of appetite, are we meant to suppose?*

‘Have you spoken to the guard?’

Sult waved his hand dismissively. ‘He says he stood outside the door all night as usual. He heard a noise, entered the room, found the Prince as you see him, still bleeding, the window open. He sent immediately for Hoff. Hoff sent for me, and I for you.’

‘The guard should be properly questioned, nonetheless . . .’ Glokta peered down at Raynault’s curled-up hand. There was something in it. He bent with an effort, his cane wobbling under his weight, and snatched it up between two fingers. *Interesting.* A piece of cloth. White cloth, it seemed, though mostly stained dark red now. He flattened it out and held it up. Gold thread glittered faintly in the dim candlelight. *I have seen cloth like this before.*

‘What is that?’ snapped Sult. ‘Have you found something?’ Glokta stayed silent. *Perhaps, but it was very easy. Almost too easy.*

Glokta nodded to Frost, and the albino reached forward and pulled the bag from the head of the Emperor’s envoy. Tulkis blinked in the harsh light, took a deep breath, and squinted round at the room. A dirty white box, too brightly lit. He took in Frost, looming at his shoulder. He took in Glokta, seated opposite. He took in the rickety chairs, and the stained table, and the polished case sitting on top of it. He did not seem to notice the small black hole in the very corner opposite him, behind Glokta’s head. He was not meant to. That was the hole through which the Arch Lector watched the proceedings. *The one through which he hears every word that is said.*

Glokta watched the envoy closely. *It is in these early moments that a man often gives away his guilt. I wonder what his first words will be? An innocent man would ask what crime he is accused of—*

‘Of what crime am I accused?’ asked Tulkis. Glokta felt his eyelid twitch. *Of course, a clever guilty man might easily ask the same question.*

‘Of the murder of Crown Prince Raynault.’

The envoy blinked, and sagged back in his chair. ‘My deepest condolences

to the Royal Family, and to all the people of the Union on this black day. But is all this really necessary?' He nodded down at the yards of heavy chain wrapped round his naked body.

'It is. If you are what we suspect you might be.'

'I see. Might I ask if it will make any difference that I am innocent of any part in this heinous crime?'

I doubt it will. Even if you are. Glokta tossed the bloodstained fragment of white cloth onto the table. 'This was found clasped in the Prince's hand.' Tulkis frowned at it, puzzled. *Just as if he never saw it before.* 'It matches exactly with a tear in a garment found in your chambers. A garment also stained liberally with blood.' Tulkis looked up at Glokta, eyes wide. *Just as though he has no idea how it got there.* 'How would you explain this?'

The envoy leaned forwards across the table, as far as he could with his hands chained behind him, and spoke swift and low. 'Please attend to me, Superior. If the Prophet's agents have discovered my mission – and they discover everything sooner or later – they will stop at nothing to make it fail. You know what they are capable of. If you punish me for this crime, it will be an insult to the Emperor. You will slap away his hand of friendship, and slap him in the face besides. He will swear vengeance, and when Uthman-ul-Dosht has sworn . . . my life means nothing, but my mission cannot fail. The consequences . . . for both our nations . . . please, Superior, I beg of you . . . I know you for an open-minded man—'

'An open mind is like to an open wound,' growled Glokta. 'Vulnerable to poison. Liable to fester. Apt to give its owner only pain.' He nodded to Frost and the albino placed the paper of confession carefully on the table top and slid it towards Tulkis with his white fingertips. He put the bottle of ink beside it and flipped open the brass lid. He placed the pen nearby. *All neat and crisp as a Sergeant-Major could wish for.*

'This is your confession.' Glokta waved his hand at the paper. 'In case you were wondering.'

'I am not guilty,' muttered Tulkis, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

Glokta twitched his face in annoyance. 'Have you ever been tortured?'

'No.'

'Have you ever seen torture carried out?'

The envoy swallowed. 'I have.'

'Then you have some inkling of what to expect.' Frost lifted the lid on Glokta's case. The trays inside lifted and fanned out like a huge and spectacular butterfly unfurling its wings for the first time, exposing Glokta's instruments in all their glittering, hypnotic, horrible beauty. He watched Tulkis' eyes fill with fear and fascination.

'I am the very best there is at this.' Glokta gave a long sigh and clasped his hands before him. 'It is not a matter for pride. It is a matter of fact. You would not be with me now if it were otherwise. I tell you so you can have no doubts. So you can answer my next question with no illusions. Look at me.' He waited for Tulkis' dark eyes to meet his. 'Will you confess?'

There was a pause. 'I am innocent,' whispered the ambassador.

'That was not my question. I will ask it again. Will you confess?'

'I cannot.'

They stared at each other for a long moment, and Glokta was left in no doubt. *He is innocent. If he could steal over the wall of the palace and in through the Prince's window without being noticed, surely he could have stolen out of the Agriont and away before we were any the wiser? Why stay, and sleep, leaving his bloodstained garment hanging in the cupboard, waiting for us to discover it? A trail of clues so blatant a blind man could follow them. We are being duped, and not even subtly. To punish the wrong man, that is one thing. But to allow myself to be made a fool of? That is another.*

'One moment,' murmured Glokta. He struggled out of his chair to the door, shut it carefully behind him, hobbled wincing up the steps to the next room and went in.

'What the hell are you up to in there?' the Arch Lector snarled at him.

Glokta kept his head bowed in a position of deep respect. 'I am trying to establish the truth, your Eminence—'

'You are trying to establish *what*? The Closed Council are waiting for a confession, and you're blathering about *what*?'

Glokta met the Arch Lector's glare. 'What if he is not lying? What if the Emperor does desire peace? What if he is innocent?'

Sult stared back at him, cold blue eyes wide open with disbelief. 'Did you lose your teeth in Gurkhul or your fucking mind? Who cares a shit for innocent? What concerns us now is what must be done! What concerns us now is what is necessary! What concerns us now is ink on paper you . . . you . . .' he was near frothing at the mouth, fists clenching and unclenching with fury, ' . . . you crippled shred of a man! Make him sign, then we can be done with this and get to licking arses in the Open Council!'

Glokta bowed his head still lower. 'Of course, your Eminence.'

'Now is your perverse obsession with the *truth* going to cause me any more trouble tonight? I'd rather use a needle than a spade, but I'll dig a confession out of this bastard either way! Must I send for Goyle?'

'Of course not, your Eminence.'

'Just get in there, damn you, and make . . . him . . . sign!'

Glokta shuffled out of his room, grumbling, stretching his neck to either side, rubbing his sore palms, working his aching shoulders round his ears and hearing the joints click. *A difficult interrogation.* Severard was sitting cross-legged on the floor opposite, his head resting against the dirty wall. 'Has he signed?'

'Of course.'

'Lovely. Another mystery solved, eh, chief?'

'I doubt it. He's no Eater. Not like Shickel was, anyway. He feels pain, believe me.'

Severard shrugged. 'She said the talents were different for each of them.'

'She did. She did.' *But still.* Glokta wiped at his runny eye, thinking. *Someone murdered the Prince. Someone had something to gain from his death. I would like to know who, even if no one else cares.* 'There are some questions I still need to ask. The guard at the Prince's chambers last night. I want to speak to him.'

The Practical raised his brows. 'Why? We've got the paper haven't we?'

‘Just bring him in.’

Severard unfolded his legs and sprang up. ‘Alright, then, you’re the boss.’ He pushed himself away from the greasy wall and sauntered off down the corridor. ‘One Knight of the Body, coming right up.’

Holding the Line

‘Did you sleep?’ asked Pike, scratching at the less burned side of his ruined face. D ‘No. You?’

The convict turned Sergeant shook his head.

‘Not for days,’ murmured Jalenhorm, wistfully. He shaded his eyes with a hand and squinted up towards the northern ridge, a ragged outline of trees under the iron grey sky. ‘Poulder’s division already set off through the woods?’

‘Before first light,’ said West. ‘We should hear that he’s in position soon. And now it looks as if Kroy’s ready to go. You have to respect his punctuality, at least.’

Below Burr’s command post, down in the valley, General Kroy’s division was moving into battle order. Three regiments of the King’s Own foot formed the centre, with a regiment of levies on the higher ground on either wing and the cavalry just behind. It was an entirely different spectacle from the ragged deployment of Ladisla’s makeshift army. The battalions flowed smoothly forwards in tightly ordered columns: tramping through the mud, the tall grass, the patches of snow in the hollows. They halted at their allotted positions and began to spread out into carefully dressed lines, a net of men stretching right across the valley. The chill air echoed with the distant thumping of their feet, the beating of their drums, the clipped calls of their commanders. Everything clean and crisp and according to procedure.

Lord Marshal Burr thrust aside his tent flap and strode out into the open air, acknowledging the salutes of the various guards and officers scattered about the space in front with sharp waves of his hand.

‘Colonel,’ he growled, frowning up at the heavens. ‘Still dry, then?’

The sun was a watery smudge on the horizon, the sky thick white with streaks of heavy grey, darker bruises hanging over the northern ridge. ‘For the moment, sir,’ said West.

‘No word from Poulder yet?’

‘No, sir. But it might be hard-going, the woods are dense.’ Not as dense as Poulder himself, West thought, but that hardly seemed the most professional thing to say.

‘Did you eat yet?’

‘Yes, sir, thank you.’ West had not eaten since last night, and even then not much. The very idea of food made him feel sick.

‘Well at least one of us did.’ Burr placed a hand sourly on his stomach. ‘Damned indigestion, I can’t touch a thing.’ He winced and gave a long burp. ‘Pardon me. And there they go.’

General Kroy must finally have declared himself satisfied with the precise positioning of every man in his division, because the soldiers in the valley had begun to move forward. A chilly breeze blew up and set the regimental standards, the flags of the battalions, the company ensigns snapping and

fluttering. The watery sun twinkled on sharpened blades and burnished armour, shone on gold braid and polished wood, glittered on buckles and harness. All advanced smoothly together, as proud a display of military might as could ever have been seen. Beyond them, down the valley to the east, a great black tower loomed up behind the trees. The nearest tower of the fortress of Dunbrec.

‘Quite the spectacle,’ muttered Burr. ‘Fifteen thousand fighting men, perhaps, all told, and almost as many more up on the ridge.’ He nodded his head at the reserve, two regiments of cavalry, dismounted and restless down below the command post. ‘Another two thousand there, waiting for orders.’ He glanced back towards the sprawling camp: a city of canvas, of carts, of stacked-up boxes and barrels, spread out in the snowy valley, black figures crawling around inside. ‘And that’s without counting all the thousands back there – cooks and grooms, smiths and drivers, servants and surgeons.’ He shook his head. ‘Some responsibility, all that, eh? You wouldn’t want to be the fool who had to take care of all that lot.’

West gave a weak smile. ‘No, sir.’

‘It looks like . . .’ murmured Jalenhorm, shading his eyes and squinting down the valley into the sun. ‘Are those . . . ?’

‘Eye-glass!’ snapped Burr, and a nearby officer produced one with a flourish. The Marshal flicked it open. ‘Well, well. Who’s this now?’

A rhetorical question, without a doubt. There was no one else it could be. ‘Bethod’s Northmen,’ said Jalenhorm, ever willing to state the obvious.

West watched them rush across the open ground through the wobbling round window of his own eye-glass. They flowed out from the trees at the far end of the valley, near to the river, spreading out like the dark stain creeping from a slit wrist. Dirty grey and brown masses congealed on the wings. Thralls, lightly armed. In the centre better ordered ranks took shape, dull metal gleaming, mail and blade. Bethod’s Carls.

‘No sign of any horse.’ That made West more nervous than ever. He had already had one near-fatal encounter with Bethod’s cavalry, and he did not care to renew the acquaintance.

‘Feels good to actually see the enemy, at last,’ said Burr, voicing the exact opposite of West’s own feelings. ‘They move smartly enough, that’s sure.’ His mouth curved up into a rare grin. ‘But they’re moving right where we want them to. The trap’s baited and ready to spring, eh, Captain?’ He passed the eye-glass to Jalenhorm, who peered through it and grinned himself.

‘Right where we want them,’ he echoed. West felt a good deal less confident. He could clearly remember the thin line of Northmen on the ridge, right where Ladisla had thought he wanted them.

Kroy’s men halted and the units shuffled into perfect position once again, just as calmly as if they stood on a vast parade ground: lines four ranks deep, reserve companies drawn up neatly behind, a thin row of flatbowmen in front. West just made out the shouted orders to fire, saw the first volley float up from Kroy’s line, shower down in amongst the enemy. He felt his nails digging painfully into his palm as he watched, fists clenched tight, willing the Northmen to die. Instead they sent back a well organised volley of their own, and then began to surge forward.

Their battle cry floated up to the officers outside the tent, that unearthly shriek, carrying on the cold air. West chewed at his lip, remembering the last time he heard it, echoing through the mist. Hard to believe it had only been a few weeks ago. Again he was guiltily glad to be well behind the lines, though a shiver down his back reminded him that it had done little good on that occasion.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Jalenhorm.

No one else spoke. West stood, teeth gritted, heart thumping, trying desperately to hold his eye-glass steady as the Northmen charged full-blooded down the valley. Kroy’s flatbows gave them one more volley, then pulled back through the carefully prepared gaps in the carefully dressed ranks, forming up again behind the lines. Spears were lowered, shields were raised, and in virtual silence, it seemed, the Union line prepared to meet the howling Northmen.

‘Contact,’ growled Lord Marshal Burr. The Union ranks seemed to wave and shift somewhat, the watery sunlight seemed to flash more rapidly on the mass of men, a vague rattling drifted on the air. Not a word was said in the command post. Each man was squinting through his eye-glass, or peering into the sun, craning to see what was happening down in the valley, hardly daring even to breathe.

After what seemed a horribly long time, Burr lowered his eye-glass. ‘Good. They’re holding. It seems your Northmen were right, West, we have the advantage in numbers, even without Poulder. When he gets here, it should be a rout—’

‘Up there,’ muttered West, ‘on the southern ridge.’ Something glinted in the treeline, and again. Metal. ‘Cavalry, sir, I’d bet my life on it. It seems Bethod had the same idea as us, but on the other wing.’

‘Damn it!’ hissed Burr. ‘Send word to General Kroy that the enemy has horse on the southern ridge! Tell him to refuse that flank and prepare to be attacked from the right!’ One of the adjutants leaped smoothly into his saddle and galloped off in the direction of Kroy’s headquarters, cold mud flying from his horse’s hooves.

‘More tricks, and this may not be the last of ’em.’ Burr snapped the eye-glass closed and thumped it into his open palm. ‘This must not be allowed to fail, Colonel West. Nothing must get in the way. Not Poulder’s arrogance, not Kroy’s pride, not the enemy’s cunning, none of it. We must have victory here today. It *must* not be allowed to fail!’

‘No, sir.’ But West was far from sure what he could do about it.

The Union soldiers were trying to be quiet, which meant they made about as much racket as a great herd of sheep being shoved indoors for shearing. Moaning and grunting, slithering on the wet ground, armour rattling, weapons knocking on low branches. Dogman shook his head as he watched ’em.

‘Lucky thing there’s no one out here, or we’d have been heard long ago,’ hissed Dow. ‘These fools couldn’t creep up on a corpse.’

‘No need for you to be making noise,’ hissed Threetrees, up ahead, then beckoned them all forward.

It was a strange feeling, marching with such a big crew again. There were two score of Shivers' Carls along with 'em, and quite an assortment. Tall men and short, young and old, all manner of different weapons and armour, but all pretty well seasoned, from what the Dogman could tell.

'Halt!' And the Union soldiers clattered and grumbled to a stop, started sorting themselves out into a line, spread across the highest part of the ridge. A great long line, the Dogman reckoned, judging from the number of men he'd watched going up into the woods, and they were right at the far end of it. He peered off into the empty trees on their left, and frowned. Lonely place to be, the end of a line.

'But the safest,' he muttered to himself.

'What's that?' asked Cathil, sitting down on a great fallen tree trunk.

'Safe here,' he said in her tongue, managing a grin. He still didn't have half an idea how to behave around her. There was a hell of a gap between them in the daylight, a yawning great gap of race, and age, and language that he wasn't sure could ever be bridged. Strange, how the gap dwindled down to nothing at night. They understood each other well enough in the dark. Maybe they'd work it out, in time, or maybe they wouldn't, and that'd be that. Still, he was glad she was there. Made him feel like a proper human man again, instead of just an animal slinking in the woods, trying to scratch his way from one mess to another.

He watched a Union officer break off from his men and walk towards them, strut up to Threetrees, some kind of a polished stick wedged under his arm. 'General Poulder asks that you remain here on the left wing, to secure the far flank.' He spoke slow and very loud, as though that'd make him understood if they didn't talk the language.

'Alright,' said Threetrees.

'The division will be deploying along the high ground to your right!' And he flicked his stick thing towards the trees where his men were slowly and noisily getting ready. 'We will be waiting until Bethod's forces are well engaged with General Kroy's division, and then we will attack, and drive them from the field!'

Threetrees nodded. 'You need our help with any of that?'

'Frankly I doubt it, but we will send word if matters change.' And he strutted off to join his men, slipping a few paces away and nearly going down on his arse in the muck.

'He's confident,' said the Dogman.

Threetrees raised his brows. 'Bit too much, if you're asking me, but if it means he leaves us out I reckon I can live with it. Right then!' he shouted, turning round to the Carls. 'Get hold o' that tree trunk and drag it up along the brow here!'

'Why?' asked one of 'em, sitting rubbing at one knee and looking sullen.

'So you got something to hide behind if Bethod turns up,' barked Dow at him. 'Get to it, fool!'

The Carls downed their weapons and set to work, grumbling. Seemed that joining up with the legendary Rudd Threetrees was less of a laugh than they'd hoped. Dogman had to smile. They should've known. Leaders don't get to be legendary by handing out light duty. The old boy himself was stood frowning

into the woods as Dogman walked up beside him. 'You worried, chief?'

'It's a good spot up here for hiding some men. A good spot for waiting 'til the battles joined, then charging down.'

'It is,' grinned the Dogman. 'That's why we're here.'

'And what? Bethod won't have thought of that?' Dogman's grin started to fade. 'If he's got men to spare he might think they'd be well used up here, waiting for the right moment, just like we are. He might send 'em through these trees here and up this hill to right where we're sitting. What'd happen then, d'you reckon?'

'We'd set to killing each other, I daresay, but Bethod don't have men to spare, according to Shivers and his boys. He's outnumbered worse'n two to one as it is.'

'Maybe, but he likes to cook up surprises.'

'Alright,' said Dogman, watching the Carls heaving the fallen tree trunk around so it blocked off the top of the slope. 'Alright. So we drag a tree across here and we hope for the best.'

'Hope for the best?' grunted Threetrees. 'Just when did that ever work?' He strode off to mutter to Grim, and Dogman shrugged his shoulders. If a few hundred Carls did turn up all of a sudden, they'd be in a fix, but there weren't much he could do about it now. So he knelt down beside his pack, pulled out his flint and some dry twigs, stacked it all up careful and started striking sparks.

Shivers squatted down near him, palms resting on his axe-handle. 'What're you at?'

'What does it look like?' Dogman blew into the kindling, watched the flame spreading out. 'I'm making me a fire.'

'Ain't we waiting for a battle to start?'

Dogman sat back, pushed some of the dry twigs closer in and watched 'em take light. 'Aye, we're waiting, and that's the best time for a fire, I reckon. War's all waiting, lad. Weeks of your life, maybe, if you're in our line o' work. You could spend that time being cold, or you could try to get comfortable.'

He slid his pan out from his pack and onto the fire. New pan, and a good one, he'd got it off the Southerners. He unwrapped the packet inside. Five eggs there, still whole. Nice, brown, speckled eggs. He cracked one on the edge of the pan, poured it in, heard it hiss, grinning all the while. Things were looking up, alright. Hadn't had eggs in a good long time. It was as he was cracking the last one that he smelled something, just as the breeze turned. Something more than eggs cooking. He jerked his head up, frowning.

'What?' asked Cathil.

'Nothing, most likely.' But it was best not to take chances. 'You wait here a moment and watch these, eh?'

'Alright.'

Dogman clambered over the fallen trunk, made for the nearest tree and leaned against it, squatting on his haunches, peering down the slope. Nothing to smell, that he could tell. Nothing to see in the trees either – just the wet earth patched with snow, the dripping pine branches and the still shadows. Nothing. Just Threetrees got him nervous with his talk about surprises.

He was turning back when he caught a whiff again. He stood up, took a few

paces downhill, away from the fire and the fallen tree, staring into the woods. Threetrees came up beside him, shield on his arm, sword drawn and clutched in his big fist.

‘What is it, Dogman, you smell something?’

‘Could be.’ He sniffed again, long and slow, sucking the air through his nose, sifting at it. ‘Most likely nothing.’

‘Don’t nothing me, Dogman, your nose has got us out of a scrape or two before now. What d’you smell?’

The breeze shifted, and this time he caught it full. Hadn’t smelled it in a while, but there was no mistaking it. ‘Shit,’ he breathed. ‘Shanka.’

‘Oy!’ And the Dogman looked round, mouth open. Cathil was just climbing over the fallen tree, the pan in her hand. ‘Eggs are done,’ she said, grinning at the two of them.

Threetrees flailed his arm at her and bellowed at the top of his lungs. ‘Everyone get back behind the—’

A bowstring went, down in the brush. Dogman heard the arrow, felt it hiss past in the air. They’re not the best of archers, on the whole, the Flatheads, and it missed him by a stride or two. It was just piss-poor luck it found another mark.

‘Ah,’ said Cathil, blinking down at the shaft in her side. ‘Ah . . .’ and she fell down, just like that, dropping the pan in the snow. Then Dogman was running up the hill towards her, his breath scraping cold in his throat. Then he was scrabbling for her arms, saw Threetrees take a hold round her knees. It was a lucky thing she weren’t heavy. Not heavy at all. An arrow or two shot past. One stuck wobbling in the tree trunk, and they bundled her over and took cover on the other side.

‘There’s Shanka down there!’ Threetrees was shouting, ‘They shot the girl!’

‘Safest place in the battle?’ growled Dow, crouching down behind the tree, spinning his axe round and round in his hand. ‘Fucking bastards!’

‘Shanka? This far south?’ someone was saying.

Dogman took Cathil under the arms and pulled her groaning back to the hollow by the fire, her heels kicking at the mud. ‘They shot me,’ she muttered, staring down at the arrow, blood spreading out from it into her shirt. She coughed, looked up at the Dogman, eyes wide.

‘They’re coming!’ Shivers was shouting. ‘Ready, boys!’ Men were drawing their weapons, tightening their belts and their shield straps, gritting their teeth and thumping each other on the backs, making ready to fight. Grim was up behind the tree, shooting arrows down the hill, calm as you like.

‘I got to go,’ said the Dogman, squeezing at Cathil’s hand, ‘but I’ll be back, alright? You just sit tight, you hear? I’ll be back.’

‘What? No!’ He had to pry her fingers away from his. He didn’t like doing it, but what choice did he have? ‘No,’ she croaked at his back as he scrambled towards the tree and the thin line of Carls hunching down behind it, a couple kneeling up to shoot their own bows. An ugly spear came over the trunk and thudded into the earth just beside him. Dogman stared at it, then slithered past, up onto his knees not far from Grim, looking down the slope.

‘Fucking shit!’ The trees were alive with Flatheads. The trees below, the trees to their left, the trees to their right. Dark shapes moving, flapping

shadows, swarming up the hill. Hundreds of them, it seemed like. Off to their right the Union soldiers were shouting and clattering, confused, armour clanking as they set their spears. Arrows hissed angry up out of the woods, flitted down into 'em. 'Fucking shit!'

'Maybe start shooting, aye?' Grim loosed a shaft, pulled another out of his quiver. Dogman snatched out an arrow himself, but there were so many targets he could hardly bring himself to pick one, and he shot too high, cursing all the while. They were getting close now, close enough for him to see their faces, if you could call 'em faces. Open flapping jaws, snarling and full of teeth, hard little eyes, full of hate. Clumsy weapons – clubs with nails in, axes made from chipped stone, rust-spotted swords stolen from the dead. Up they came, seeming fast as wolves through the trees.

Dogman got one in the chest, saw it drop back. He hit another through the leg, but the rest weren't slowing. 'Ready!' he heard Threetrees roaring, felt men standing up around him, lifting their blades, their spears, their shields, to meet the charge. He wondered how a man was meant to get ready for this.

A Flathead came springing through the air over the tree, mouth wide open and snarling. Dogman saw it there, black in the air, heard a great roar in his ear, then Tul's sword ripped into it and flung it back, blood spraying out of it like water from a smashed bottle.

Another came scrambling up and Threetrees took its arm clean off with his sword, smashed it back down the slope with his shield. More of 'em were coming now, and still more, swarming over the fallen trunk in a crowd. Dogman shot one in the face at no more than a stride away, pulled his knife out and stabbed it in the gut, screaming as loud as he could, blood leaking warm over his hand. He tore its club from its claw as it fell and swung it at another, missed and reeled away. Men were shouting and stabbing and hacking all over.

He saw Shivers wedge a Shanka's head against the tree with his boot, lift his shield high above his head and ram the metal rim deep into its face. He knocked another sprawling with his axe, spraying blood into Dogman's eyes, then caught a third in his arms as it sprang over the tree and they rolled onto the wet dirt together, flopping over and over. The Shanka came out on top and Dogman smashed it in the back with the club, once, twice, three times and Shivers shoved it off and scrambled up, stomped on the back of its head. He charged past, hacking another Flathead down just as it spitted a squealing Carl through the side with a spear.

Dogman blinked, trying to wipe the blood from his eyes on the back of his sleeve. He saw Grim lift his knife and stab it through a Flathead's skull, the blade sliding out its mouth and nailing it tight to a tree trunk. He saw Tul smashing his great fist into a Shanka's face, again and again until its skull was nothing but red pulp. A Flathead sprang up onto the tree above him, spear raised, but before it could stab him Dow leaped up and chopped its legs out from under it. It spun in the air, screaming.

Dogman saw a Shanka on top of a Carl, taking a great bite out of his neck. He snatched the spear out of the ground behind him and flung it square into the Flathead's back. It fell, gibbering and clawing over its own shoulders, trying to get to the thing, but it was stuck clean through.

Another Carl was thrashing around, roaring, a Shanka's teeth sunk into his arm, punching at it with his other hand. Dogman took a step to help him but before he got there a Flathead came at him with a spear. He saw it in good time and dodged round it, slashed it across the eyes with his knife as it came past, then cracked the club down on the back of its skull, felt it crunch like a breaking egg. He turned to face another. A damn big one. It opened its jaws at him and snarled, drool running out from its teeth, a great axe in its claws.

'Come on!' he screamed at it, raising the club and the knife. Before it could come at him Threetrees had stepped up behind it and split it open from shoulder to chest. Blood splattered out and it grovelled in the mud. It managed to get up a ways, somehow, but all that did was put its face in the best place for Dogman to stab his knife into.

Now the Shanka were falling back and the Carls were shouting and hacking them down as they turned. The last one squawked and went for the tree, trying to scramble over. It gibbered as Dow's sword hacked a bloody gash across its back, all red meat and splinters of white bone. It fell tangled over a branch, twitched and lay still, its legs dangling.

'They're done!' roared Shivers, his face spotted with blood under his long hair. 'We did 'em!'

The Carls cheered and shouted and shook their weapons. Leastways most of 'em did. There were a couple lying still and a few more laid out wounded, groaning, gurgling through clenched teeth. The Dogman didn't reckon they felt much like celebrating. Neither did Threetrees.

'Shut up, you fools! They're gone for now but there'll be more. That's the thing with Flatheads, there's always more! Get them bodies out of the way! Salvage all the arrows we can get! We'll need 'em before today's through!'

The Dogman was already limping back towards the smouldering fire. Cathil was lying where he'd left her, breathing fast and shallow, one hand pressed against her ribs around the shaft. She watched him coming with wide, wet eyes and said nothing. He said nothing either. What was there to say? He took his knife and slit her bloody shirt, from the arrow down to the hem, peeled it away from her until he could see the shaft. It was stuck between two ribs on the right hand side, just under her tit. Not a good place to get shot, if there was such a thing.

'Is it alright?' she mumbled, teeth rattling. Her face was white as snow, eyes feverish bright. 'Is it alright?'

'It's alright,' he said, rubbing the dirt off her wet cheek with his thumb. 'Don't you fret now, eh? We'll get it sorted.' And all the time he was thinking, you fucking liar, Dogman, you fucking coward. She's got an arrow in her ribs.

Threetrees squatted down beside them. 'It'll have to come out,' he said, frowning hard. 'I'll hold her, you pull it.'

'Do what?'

'What's he saying?' hissed Cathil, blood on her teeth. 'What's he . . .' Dogman took hold of the shaft in both hands while Threetrees took her wrists. 'What're you—'

Dogman pulled, and it wouldn't come. He pulled, and blood ran out from the wound round the shaft and slid down her pale side in two dark lines. He pulled, and her body thrashed and her legs kicked and she screamed like he

was killing her. He pulled, and it wouldn't come, and it wouldn't even shift a finger's breadth.

'Pull it!' hissed Threetrees.

'It won't fucking come!' snarled the Dogman in his face.

'Alright! Alright.' Dogman let go the arrow and Cathil coughed and gurgled, shuddering and shaking, gasping in air and dribbling out pink spit.

Threetrees rubbed at his jaw, leaving a bloody smear across his face. 'If you can't pull it out, you'll have to push it on through.'

'What?'

'What's he . . . saying?' gurgled Cathil, her teeth chattering.

Dogman swallowed. 'We got to push it through.'

'No,' she muttered, eyes going wide. 'No.'

'We got to.' She snorted as he took hold of the shaft and snapped it off halfway down, cupped his palms over the broken end.

'No,' she whimpered.

'Just hold on, girl,' muttered Threetrees in common, gripping hold of her arms again. 'Just hold on, now. Do it, Dogman.'

'No . . .'

Dogman gritted his teeth and shoved down hard on the broken shaft. Cathil jerked and made a kind of sigh, then her eyes rolled back, passed out clean. Dogman half rolled her, body limp as a rag, saw the arrow head sticking out her back.

'Alright,' he muttered, 'alright, it's through.' He took hold of it just below the blade, twisted it gently as he slid it out. A splatter of blood came with it, but not too much.

'That's good,' said Threetrees. 'Don't reckon it got a lung, then.'

Dogman chewed at his lip. 'That's good.' He grabbed up a roll of bandage, put it against the leaking hole in her back, started winding it round her chest, Threetrees lifting her up while he passed it underneath her. 'That's good, that's good.' He said it over and over, winding the bandage round, fumbling fast as he could with cold fingers until it was done up tight, as good as he knew how. His hands were bloody, the bandage was bloody, her stomach and her back were covered in his pink finger marks, in streaks of dark dirt and dark blood. He pulled her shirt back down over her, rolled her gently onto her back. He touched her face – warm, eyes closed, her chest moving softly, her breath smoking round her mouth.

'Need to get a blanket.' He started up, fumbled through his pack, pulled out his blanket, scattering gear around the fire. He dragged it back, shook it out and laid it over her. 'Keep you warm, eh? Nice and warm.' He pushed it in around her, keep the cold out. He tugged it down over her feet. 'Keep warm.'

'Dogman.'

Threetrees was bending over, listening to her breath. He straightened up, and slowly shook his head. 'She's dead.'

'What?'

White specks drifted down round them. It was starting to snow again.

'Where the hell is Poulder?' snarled Marshal Burr, staring down the valley, his

fists clenching and unclenching with frustration. 'I said wait until we're engaged, not damn well overrun!'

West could think of no reply. Where, indeed, was Poulder? The snow was thickening now, coming down softly in swirls and eddies, letting fall a grey curtain across the battlefield, lending to everything an air of unreality. The sounds came up as though from impossibly far away, muffled and echoing. Messengers rode back and forth behind the lines, black dots moving swiftly over the white ground with urgent calls for reinforcement. The wounded were building up, dragged groaning in stretchers, gasping in carts, or trudging, silent and bloody down the road below the headquarters.

Even through the snow it was clear that Kroy's men were hard pressed. The carefully drawn lines now bulged alarmingly in the centre, units dissolved into a single straining mass, merged with one another in the chaos and confusion of combat. West had lost track of the number of staff officers General Kroy had sent to the command post demanding support or permission to withdraw, all of them sent back with the same message. To hold, and to wait. From Poulder, meanwhile, came nothing but an ominous and unexpected silence.

'Where the hell is he?' Burr stomped back to his tent leaving dark footprints in the fresh crust of white. 'You!' he shouted at an adjutant, beckoning him impatiently. West followed at a respectful distance and pushed through the tent flap after him, Jalenhorn just behind.

Marshal Burr leaned over his table and snatched a pen from an ink-bottle, spattering black drops on the wood. 'Get up into those woods and find General Poulder! Establish what the hell he is doing and return to me at once!'

'Yes, sir!' squawked the officer, standing to vibrating attention.

Burr's pen scrawled orders across the paper. 'Inform him that he is commanded to begin his attack immediately!' He signed his name with an angry slash of the wrist and jerked the paper out to the adjutant.

'Of course, sir!' The young officer strode purposefully from the tent.

Burr turned back to his maps, wincing as he glared down, one hand tugging on his beard, the other pressed to his belly. 'Where the hell is Poulder?'

'Perhaps, sir, he has himself come under attack—'

Burr burped, and grimaced, burped again and thumped the table making the ink bottle rattle. 'Curse this fucking indigestion!' His thick finger stabbed at the map. 'If Poulder doesn't arrive soon we'll have to commit the reserve, West, you hear me? Commit the cavalry.'

'Yes, sir, of course.'

'This cannot be allowed to fail.' The Marshal frowned, swallowed. It seemed to West he had gone suddenly very pale. 'This cannot . . . cannot . . .' He swayed slightly, blinking.

'Sir, are you—'

'Bwaaaaah!' And Marshal Burr jerked forwards and sprayed black vomit over the table top. It splattered against the maps and turned the paper angry red. West stood frozen, his jaw gradually dropping open. Burr gurgled, fists clenched on the table in front of him, his body shaking, then he hunched over and poured out puke again. 'Guuurgh!' And he lurched away, red drool dangling from his lip, eyes starting from his white face, gave a strangled groan and toppled back, dragging one bloody chart with him.

West finally understood what was happening just in time to dive forwards and catch the Lord Marshal's limp body before he fell. He staggered across the tent, struggling to hold him up.

'Shit!' gasped Jalenhorm.

'Help me, damn it!' snarled West. The big man started over and took Burr's other arm, and together they half lifted, half dragged him to his bed. West undid the Marshal's top button, loosened his collar. 'Some sickness of the stomach,' he muttered through clenched teeth. 'He's been complaining for weeks . . .'

'I'll get the surgeon!' squealed Jalenhorm.

He started up but West caught hold of his arm. 'No.'

The big man stared back. 'What?'

'If it becomes known that he's ill, there'll be panic. Poulder and Kroy will do as they please. The army might fall apart. No one can know until after the battle.'

'But—'

West got up and put his hand on Jalenhorm's shoulder, looking him straight in the eye. He knew already what had to be done. He would not be a spectator at another disaster. 'Listen to me. We must follow through with the plan. We must.'

'Who must?' Jalenhorm stared wildly round the tent. 'Me and you, alone?'

'If that's what it takes.'

'But this is a man's life!'

'This is thousands of men's lives,' hissed West. 'It cannot be allowed to fail, you heard him say it.'

Jalenhorm had turned almost as pale as Burr. 'I hardly think he meant that —'

'Don't forget you owe me.' West leaned still closer. 'Without me you'd be one in a pile of corpses rotting nicely north of the Cumnur.' He didn't like doing it, but it had to be done, and there was no time for niceties. 'Do we understand each other, Captain?'

Jalenhorm swallowed. 'Yes, sir, I think so.'

'Good. You watch Marshal Burr, I'll take care of things outside.' West got up and made for the tent flap.

'What if he—'

'Improvise!' he snapped, over his shoulder. There were bigger things to worry about now than any one man. He ducked out into the cold air. At least a score of officers and guards were scattered around the command post before the tent, pointing down into the white valley, peering through eye-glasses and muttering to one another. 'Sergeant Pike!' West beckoned to the convict and he strode over through the falling snow. 'I need you to stand guard here, do you understand?'

'Of course, sir.'

'I need you to stand guard here, and admit no one but me or Captain Jalenhorm. No one.' He dropped his voice lower. 'Under any circumstances.'

Pike nodded, his eyes glittering in the pink mass of his face. 'I understand.' And he moved to the tent flap and stood beside it, almost carelessly, his thumbs tucked into his sword belt.

A moment later a horse plunged down the slope and into the headquarters, smoke snorting from its nostrils. Its rider slid down from his saddle, stumbled a couple of steps before West managed to get in his way.

'An urgent message for Marshal Burr from General Poulder!' blathered the man in a rush. He tried to take a stride towards the tent but West did not move.

'Marshal Burr is busy. You can deliver your message to me.'

'I was explicitly told to—'

'To me, Captain!'

The man blinked. 'General Poulder's division is engaged, sir, in the woods.'

'Engaged?'

'Hotly engaged. There have been several savage attacks on the left wing and we're hard pressed to hold our own. General Poulder requests permission to withdraw and regroup, sir, we're all out of position!'

West swallowed. The plan was already coming unravelled, and in imminent danger of falling apart completely. 'Withdraw? No! Impossible. If he pulls back, Kroy's division will be left exposed. Tell General Poulder to hold his ground, and to go through with the attack if he possibly can. Tell him he must not withdraw under any circumstances! Every man must do his part!'

'But, sir, I should—'

'Go!' shouted West. 'At once!'

The man saluted and clambered back onto his horse. Even as he was spurring up the slope another visitor was pulling up his mount not far from the tent. West cursed under his breath. It was Colonel Felnigg, Kroy's chief of staff. He would not be so easily put off.

'Colonel West,' he snapped as he swung down from the saddle. 'Our division is fiercely engaged all across the line, and now cavalry has appeared on our right wing! A charge by cavalry against a regiment of levies!' He was already making for the tent, pulling off his gloves. 'Without support they won't hold long, and if they break, our flank will be up in the air! It could be the end! Where the hell is Poulder?'

West attempted unsuccessfully to slow Felnigg down. 'General Poulder has come under attack himself. However, I will order the reserves released immediately and—'

'Not good enough,' growled Felnigg, brushing past him and striding towards the tent flap. 'I must speak to Marshal Burr at—'

Pike stepped out in front of him, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. 'The Marshal . . . is busy,' he whispered. His eyes bulged from his burned face in a manner so horribly threatening that even West felt slightly unnerved. There was a tense silence for a moment as the staff officer and the faceless convict stared at one another.

Then Felnigg took a hesitant step back. He blinked, licked his lips nervously. 'Busy. I see. Well.' He took another step away. 'The reserves will be committed, you say?'

'Immediately.'

'Well then, well then . . . I will tell General Kroy to expect reinforcements.' Felnigg shoved one toe into his stirrup. 'This is highly irregular, though.' He frowned down at the tent, at Pike, at West. 'Highly irregular.' And he gave his

horse the spurs and charged back down into the valley. West watched him go, thinking that Felnigg had no idea just how irregular. He turned to an adjutant.

‘Marshal Burr has ordered the reserve into action on the right wing. They must charge Bethod’s cavalry and drive them off. If that flank weakens, it will mean disaster. Do you understand?’

‘I should have written orders from the Marshal—’

‘There is no time for written orders!’ roared West. ‘Get down there and do your duty, man!’

The adjutant hurried obediently away down the slope towards the two regiments of reserves, waiting patiently in the snow. West watched him go, his fingers working nervously. The men began to mount up, began to trot into position for a charge. West was chewing at his lip as he turned around. The officers and guards of Burr’s staff were all looking at him with expressions ranging from mildly curious to downright suspicious.

He nodded to a couple of them as he walked back, trying to give the impression that everything was routine. He wondered how long it would be before someone refused to simply take his word, before someone forced their way into the tent, before someone discovered that Lord Marshal Burr was halfway to the land of the dead, and had been for some time. He wondered if it would happen before the lines broke in the valley, and the command post was overrun by Northmen. If it was after, he supposed it would hardly matter.

Pike was looking over at him with an expression that might have been something like a grin. West would have liked to grin back, but he didn’t have it in him.

The Dogman sat, and breathed. His back was to the fallen tree, his bow was hanging loose in his fist. A sword was stuck into the wet earth beside him. He’d taken it from a dead Carl, and put it to use, and he reckoned he’d have more use for it before the day was out. There was blood on him – on his hands, on his clothes, all over. Cathil’s, Flatheads’, his own. Wiping it off hardly seemed worth the effort – there’d be plenty more soon enough.

Three times the Shanka had come up the hill now, and three times they’d fought them off, each fight harder than the one before. Dogman wondered if they’d fight them off when they came again. He never doubted that they were coming. Not for a minute. When and how many were the questions that bothered him.

Through the trees he could hear the Union wounded screeching and squealing. Lots of wounded. One of the Carls had lost his hand the last time they came. Lost was the wrong word, maybe, since it got cut off with an axe. He’d been screaming loud just after, but now he was quiet, breathing soft and wheezy. They’d strapped the stump up with a rag and a belt, and now he was staring at it, with that look the wounded get sometimes. White and big-eyed, looking at his hacked-off wrist as if he couldn’t understand what he was seeing. As if it was a constant surprise to him.

Dogman eased himself up slow, peering over the top of the fallen tree trunk. He could see the Flatheads, down in the woods. Sat there in the shadows. Waiting. He didn’t like seeing ’em lurking down there. Shanka come at you

until they're finished, or they run.

'What are they waiting for?' he hissed. 'When did bloody Flatheads learn to wait?'

'When did they learn to fight for Bethod?' growled Tul, wiping his sword clean. 'There's a lot that's changing, and none of it for the better.'

'When did anything change for the better?' snarled Dow from further down the line.

Dogman frowned. There was a new smell in his nose, like damp. There was something pale, down in the trees, getting paler while he watched. 'What is that? That mist?'

'Mist? Up here?' Dow chuckled harsh as a crow calling. 'This time of day? Hah! Hold on, though . . .' They could all see it now – a trace of white, clinging to the wet slope. Dogman swallowed. His mouth was dry. He was feeling uneasy, all of a sudden, and not just from the Shanka waiting down there. Something else. The mist was creeping up through the trees, curling round the trunks, rising while they watched. The Flatheads were starting to move, dim shapes shifting in the grey murk.

'Don't like this,' he heard Dow saying. 'This ain't natural.'

'Steady, lads!' Threetrees' deep voice. 'Steady, now!' Dogman took heart from that, but his heart didn't last long. He rocked back and forth, feeling sick.

'No, no,' whispered Shivers, his eyes sliding around like he was looking for a way out. Dogman could feel the hairs on his own arms rising, his skin prickling, his throat closing up tight. A nameless sort of a fear was taking him, flowing up the hillside along with the mist – creeping through the forest, swirling round the trees, sliding under the trunk they were using as cover.

'It's him,' whispered Shivers, his eyes open wide as a pair of boot-tops, squashing himself down like he was scared of being heard. 'It's him!'

'Who?' croaked Dogman.

Shivers just shook his head and pressed himself to the cold earth. The Dogman felt a powerful need to do the same, but he forced himself to rise up, forced himself to take a look over the tree. A Named Man, scared as a child in the dark, and not knowing why? Better to face it, he thought. Big mistake.

There was a shadow in the mist, too tall and too straight for a Shanka. A great, huge man, big as Tul. Bigger even. A giant. Dogman rubbed his sore eyes, thinking it must be some trick of the light in all that gloom, but it wasn't. He came on closer, this shadow, and he took on more shape, and more, and the clearer he got, the worse grew the fear.

He'd been long and far, the Dogman, all over the North, but he'd never seen so strange and unnatural a thing as this giant. One half of him was covered in great plates of black armour – studded and bolted, beaten and pointed, spiked and hammered and twisted metal. The other half was mostly bare, apart from the straps and belts and buckles that held the armour on. Bare foot, bare arm, bare chest, all bulging out with ugly slabs and cords of muscle. A mask was on his face, a mask of scarred black iron.

He came on closer, and he rose from the mist, and the Dogman saw the giant's skin was painted. Marked blue with tiny letters. Scrawled across with writing, every inch of him. No weapon, but he was no less terrible for that. He was more, if anything. He scorned to carry one, even on a battlefield.

'By the fucking dead,' breathed the Dogman, and his mouth hung wide with horror.

'Steady, lads,' growled Threetrees. 'Steady.' The old boy's voice was the only thing stopping the Dogman from running for it, and never coming back.

'It's him!' squealed one of the Carls, voice shrill as a girl's. 'It's the Feared!'

'Shut your fucking hole!' came Shivers' voice, 'We know what it is!'

'Arrows!' shouted Threetrees.

Dogman's hands were trembling as he took an aim on the giant. It was hard somehow, to do it, even from this distance. He had to make his hand let go the string, and then the arrow pinged off the armour and away into the trees, harmless. Grim's shot was better. His shaft sank clean into the giant's side, buried deep in his painted flesh. He seemed not even to notice. More arrows shot over from the Carls' bows. One hit him in the shoulder, another stuck right through his huge calf. The giant made not a sound. He came on, steady as the grass growing, and the mist, and the Flatheads, and the fear came with him.

'Fuck,' muttered Grim.

'It's a devil!' one of the Carls screeched. 'A devil from hell!' Dogman was starting to think the same thing. He felt the fear growing up all round him, felt the men starting to waver. He felt himself edging backwards, almost without thinking about it.

'Alright, now!' bellowed Threetrees, voice deep and steady as if he felt no fear at all. 'On the count of three! On the count of three, we charge!'

Dogman stared over as if the old boy had lost his reason. At least they had a tree to hide behind up here. He heard a couple of the Carls muttering, no doubt thinking much the same. They didn't much like the sound of this for a plan, charging down a hill into a great crowd of Shanka, some unnatural giant at the heart of 'em.

'You sure about this?' Dogman hissed.

Threetrees didn't even look at him. 'Best thing for a man to do when he's afeared is charge! Get the blood up, and turn the fear to fury. The ground's on our side, and we ain't waiting here for 'em!'

'You sure?'

'We're going,' said Threetrees, turning away.

'We're going,' growled Dow, glaring round at the Carls, daring 'em to back down.

'On three!' rumbled the Thunderhead.

'Uh,' said Grim. Dogman swallowed, still not sure whether he'd be going or not. Threetrees peered over the trunk, his mouth a hard, flat line, watching the figures in the mist, and the great big one in the midst of 'em, his hand down flat behind him to say wait. Waiting for the right distance. Waiting for the right time.

'Do I go on three?' whispered Shivers, 'or after three?'

Dogman shook his head. 'Don't hardly matter, as long as you go.' But his feet felt like they were two great stones.

'One!'

One already? Dogman looked over his shoulder, saw Cathil's body lying stretched out under his blanket near the dead fire. Should have made him feel

angry maybe, but it only made him feel more scared. Fact was, he'd no wish to end up like her. He swallowed and turned away, clutched tight to the handle of his knife, to the grip of the sword he'd borrowed off the dead. Iron felt no fear. Good weapons, ready to do bloody work. He wished he was halfway as ready himself, but he'd done this before, and he knew no one was ever really ready. You don't have to be ready. You just have to go.

'Two!'

Almost time. He felt his eyes opening wide, his nose sucking in cold air, his skin tingling cold. He smelled men and sharp pine trees, Shanka and damp mist. He heard quick breath behind, slow footsteps down below, shouts from along the line, his own blood thumping in his veins. He saw every bit of everything, all going slow as dripping honey. Men moved around him, hard men with hard faces, shifting their weight, pushing forward against the fear and the mist, making ready. They were going to go, he'd no doubt left of it. They were all going to go. He felt the muscles in his legs begin to squeeze, pushing him up.

'Three!'

Threetrees was first over the trunk and the Dogman was just behind, men all round him charging, and the air full of their shouts and their fury and their fear, and he was running, and screaming, feet pounding and shaking his bones, breath and wind rushing, black trees and white sky crashing and wobbling, mist flying up at him and dark shapes inside the mist, waiting.

He swung his sword at one as he roared past and the blade chopped deep into it and threw it back, turned the Dogman half round and he went along, spinning, falling, shouting. The blade hacked deep into a Shanka's leg and snatched it off its feet, and Dogman spilled down the slope, slithering around in the slush, trying to right himself. The sounds of fighting were all round, muffled and strange. Men bellowing curses, and Shanka snarling, and the rattles and thuds of iron on iron and iron in flesh.

He spun about, sliding between the trees, not knowing where the next Flathead might come from, not knowing whether he might get a spear in his back any minute. He saw a shape in the murk and sprang forward at it, shouting as hard as he could. The mist seemed to lift away in front of him, and he slithered to a horrified stop, the sound rattling out in his throat, nearly falling over backwards in his hurry to get away.

The Feared was no more than five strides from him, bigger and more terrible than ever, broken arrows sticking from his tattooed flesh all over. Didn't help that he had a Carl round the neck, out at arm's length, kicking and struggling. The painted sinews in his forearm twisted and squirmed and the huge fingers tightened, and the Carl's eyes bulged, and his mouth opened and no sound came out. There was a crunch, and the giant tossed the corpse away like a rag and it turned over and over in the snow and the mud, head flopping about, and lay still.

The Feared stood, mist flowing round him, looking down at the Dogman from behind his black mask, and the Dogman looked back, halfway to pissing himself.

But some things have to be done. Better to do 'em, than to live with the fear of 'em. That's what Logen would have said. So the Dogman opened his mouth,

and screamed as loud as he could, and he charged, swinging the borrowed sword over his head.

The giant lifted his great iron-plated arm and caught the blade. Metal clanged on metal and rattled the Dogman's teeth, tore the sword away and sent it spinning, but he stabbed with his knife at the same moment and slipped it under the giant's arm, ramming it right to the hilt in his tattooed side.

'Hah!' shouted the Dogman, but he didn't get long to celebrate. The Feared's huge arm flashed through the mist, caught him a backhand across the chest and flung him gurgling through the air. The woods reeled and a tree came out of nowhere, crashed into his back and sent him sprawling in the mud. He tried to get a breath and couldn't. Tried to roll over and couldn't. Pain crushed his ribs, like a great rock pressing on his chest.

He looked up, hands clutching at the mud, hardly enough breath in him even to groan. The Feared was walking to him, no rush. He reached down and pulled the knife out of his side. It looked like a toy between his huge finger and thumb. Like a tooth-pick. He flicked it away into the trees, a long drip of blood going with it. He lifted his great armoured foot, ready to stomp down on the Dogman's head and crush his skull like a nut on an anvil, and Dogman could only lie there, helpless with pain and fear as the great shadow fell across his face.

'You bastard!' And Threetrees came flying out of the trees, crashed into the giant's armoured hip with his shield and knocked him sideways, the huge metal boot squelching into the dirt just beside the Dogman's face and splattering him with mud. The old boy pressed in, hacking away at the Feared's bare side while he was off balance, snarling and cursing at him while the Dogman gasped and squirmed, trying to get up and only making it as far as sitting, back to the tree.

The giant threw his armoured fist hard enough to bring a house down, but Threetrees got round it and turned it off his shield, brought his sword up and over and knocked a fearsome dent in the Feared's mask, snapping his great head back and making him stagger, blood splattering from the mouth hole. The old boy pressed in quick and slashed hard across the plates on the giant's chest, blade striking sparks from the black iron and carving a great gash into the bare blue flesh beside it. A killing blow, no doubt, but only a few specks of blood flew off the swinging blade, and it left no wound at all.

The giant found his balance now, and he gave a great bellow that left Dogman trembling with fear. He set his huge foot behind him, lifted his massive arm and hurled it forward. It crashed into Threetrees' shield and ripped a chunk out of the edge, split the timbers and went on through, thudded into the old boy's shoulder and flung him groaning onto his back. The Feared pressed in on top of him, lifting his big blue fist up high. Threetrees snarled and stabbed his sword clean through his tattooed thigh right to the hilt. Dogman saw the point slide bloody out the back of his leg, but it didn't even slow him. That great hand dropped down and crunched into Threetrees' ribs with a sound like dry sticks breaking.

Dogman groaned, clawing at the dirt, but his chest was on fire and he couldn't get up, and he couldn't do anything but watch. The Feared lifted up his other fist now, covered in black iron. He lifted it up slow and careful,

waited up high, then brought it whistling down, smashed it into Threetrees' other side and crushed him sighing into the dirt. The great arm went up again, red blood on blue knuckles.

And a black line came out of the mist and stabbed into the Feared's armpit, shoving him over sideways. Shivers, with a spear, jabbing at the giant and shouting, pushing him across the slope. The Feared rolled and slithered up, faked a step back and flicked out his hand quick as a massive snake, slapped Shivers away like a man might swat a fly, squawking and kicking into the mist.

Before the giant could follow him there was a roar like thunder and Tul's sword crashed into his armoured shoulder and flung him down on one knee. Now Dow came out of the mist, slashed a great chunk out of his leg from behind. Shivers was up again, snarling and jabbing with his spear, and the three of 'em seemed to have the giant penned in.

He should've been dead, however big he was. The wounds Threetrees, and Shivers, and Dow had given him, he should have been mud. Instead he rose up again, six arrows and Threetrees' sword stuck through his flesh, and he let go a roar from behind his iron mask that made Dogman tremble to his toes. Shivers fell back on his arse, going white as milk. Tul blinked and faltered and let his sword drop. Even Black Dow took a step away.

The Feared reached down and took hold of the hilt of Threetrees' sword. He slid it out from his leg and let it drop bloody in the dirt at his feet. It left no wound behind. No wound at all. Then he turned and sprang away into the gloom, and the mist closed in behind him, and the Dogman heard the sounds of him crashing away through the trees, and he was never so glad to see the back of anything.

'Come 'ere!' Dow screamed, making ready to tear down the slope after him, but Tul got in his way with one big hand held up.

'You're going nowhere. We don't know how many Shanka there are down there. We can kill that thing another day.'

'Out o' my way, big lad!'

'No.'

Dogman rolled forward, wincing all the way at the pain in his chest, started clawing his way up the slope. The mist was already spilling back, leaving the cold clear air behind. Grim was coming down the other way, bow string drawn back with an arrow nocked. There were a lot of corpses in the mud and the snow. Shanka mostly, and a couple of Carls.

Seemed to take the Dogman an age to drag himself up to Threetrees. The old boy was lying on his back in the mud, one arm lying still with his broken shield strapped to it. Air was snorting in shallow through his nose, bubbling back out bloody from his mouth. His eyes rolled down to Dogman as he crawled up next to him, and he reached out and grabbed a hold of his shirt, pulled him down, hissing in his ear through clenched tight, bloody teeth.

'Listen to me, Dogman! Listen!'

'What, chief?' croaked Dogman, hardly able to talk for the pain in his chest. He waited, and he listened, and nothing came. Threetrees' eyes were wide open, staring up at the branches. A drop of water splattered on his cheek, ran down into his bloody beard. Nothing else.

‘Back to the mud,’ said Grim, face hanging slack as old cobwebs.

West chewed at his fingernails as he watched General Kroy and his staff riding up the road, a group of dark-dressed men on dark horses, solemn as a procession of undertakers. The snow had stopped, for now, but the sky was angry black, the light so bad it felt like evening, and an icy wind was blowing through the command post making the fabric of the tent snap and rustle. West’s borrowed time was almost done.

He felt a sudden impulse, almost overpowering, to turn and run. An impulse so ludicrous that he immediately had another, equally inappropriate, to burst out laughing. Luckily, he was able to stop himself from doing either. Lucky to stop himself laughing, at least. This was far from a laughing matter. As the clattering hooves came closer, he was left wondering whether the idea of running was such a foolish one after all.

Kroy pulled his black charger up savagely and climbed down, jerked his uniform smooth, adjusted his sword belt, turned sharply and came on towards the tent. West intercepted him, hoping to get the first word in and buy a few more moments. ‘General Kroy, well done, sir, your division fought with great tenacity!’

‘Of course they did, *Colonel West*.’ Kroy sneered the name as though he were delivering a mortal insult, his staff gathering into a menacing half circle behind him.

‘And might I ask our situation?’

‘Our *situation*?’ snarled the General. ‘Our situation is that the Northmen are driven off, but not routed. We gave them a mauling, in the end, but my units were fought out, every man. Too weary to pursue. The enemy have been able to withdraw across the fords, thanks to Poulder’s cowardice! I mean to see him cashiered in disgrace! I mean to see him hanged for treason! I will see it done, on my honour!’ He glowered around the headquarters while his men muttered angrily amongst themselves. ‘Where is Lord Marshal Burr? I demand to see the Lord Marshal!’

‘Of course, if you could just give me . . .’ West’s words were smothered by the mounting noise of more rushing hooves, and a second group of riders careered around the side of the Marshal’s tent. Who else but General Poulder, accompanied by his own enormous staff. A cart pulled into the headquarters along with them, crowding the narrow space with beasts and men. Poulder vaulted down from his saddle and hastened through the dirt. His hair was in disarray, his jaw was locked tight, there was a long scratch down his cheek. His crimson entourage followed behind him: steels rattling, gold braid flapping, faces flushed.

‘Poulder!’ hissed Kroy. ‘You’ve some nerve showing your face in front of me! Some nerve! The only damn nerve you’ve shown all day!’

‘How dare you!’ screeched Poulder. ‘I demand an apology! Apologise at once!’

‘Apologise? Me, apologise? Hah! You’ll be the one saying sorry, I’ll see to it! The plan was for you to come in from the left wing! We were hard pressed for more than two hours!’

'Almost three hours, sir,' chipped in one of Kroy's staff, unhelpfully.

'Three hours, damn it! If that is not cowardice I fumble for the definition!'

'*Cowardice?*' shrieked Poulder. A couple of his staff went as far as to place their hands on their steels. 'You will apologise to me immediately! My division came under a brutal and sustained attack upon our flank! I was obliged to lead a charge myself! On foot!' And he thrust forward his cheek and indicated the scratch with one gloved finger. 'It was we who did all the fighting! We who won the victory here today!'

'Damn you, Poulder, you did nothing! The victory belongs to my men alone! An attack? An attack from what? From animals of the forest?'

'Ah-ha! Exactly so! Show him!'

One of Poulder's staff ripped back the oilskin on the cart, displaying what seemed at first to be a heap of bloody rags. He wrinkled up his nose and shoved it forward. The thing flopped off onto the ground, rolled onto its back and stared up at the sky with beetling black eyes. A huge, misshapen jaw hung open, long, sharp teeth sticking every which way. Its skin was a greyish brown colour, rough and calloused, its nose was an ill-formed stub. Its skull was flattened and hairless with a heavy ridge of brow and a small, receding forehead. One of its arms was short and muscular, the other much longer and slightly bent, both ending in claw-like hands. The whole creature seemed lumpen, twisted, primitive. West gawped down at it, open-mouthed.

Plainly, it was not human.

'There!' squealed Poulder in triumph. 'Now tell us my division didn't fight! There were hundreds of these . . . these creatures out there! Thousands, and they fight like mad things! We only just managed to hold our ground, and it's damn lucky for you that we did! I demand!' he frothed, 'I demand!' he ranted, 'I demand!' he shrieked, face turning purple, 'an apology!'

Kroy's eyes twitched with incomprehension, with anger, with frustration. His lips twisted, his jaw worked, his fists clenched. Clearly there was no entry in the rule book for a situation such as this. He rounded on West.

'I demand to see Marshal Burr!' he snarled.

'As do I!' screeched Poulder shrilly, not to be outdone.

'The Lord Marshal is . . .' West's lips moved silently. He had no ideas left. No strategies, no ruses, no schemes. 'He is . . .' There would be no retreat across the fords for him. He was finished. More than likely he would end up in a penal colony himself. 'He is—'

'I am here.'

And to West's profound amazement, Burr was standing in the entrance to his tent. Even in the half-light, it seemed obvious that he was terribly ill. His face was ashen pale and there was a sheen of sweat across his forehead. His eyes were sunken and ringed with black. His lip quivered, his legs were unsteady, he clutched at the tent-pole beside him for support. West could see a dark stain down the front of his uniform that looked very much like blood.

'I am afraid I have been . . . somewhat unwell during the battle,' he croaked. 'Something I ate, perhaps.' His hand trembled on the pole and Jalenhorm lurked near his shoulder, ready to catch him if he fell, but by some superhuman effort of will the Lord Marshal stayed on his feet. West glanced nervously at the angry gathering, wondering what they might make of this

walking corpse. But the two Generals were far too caught up in their own feud to pay any attention to that.

‘Lord Marshal, I must protest about General Poulder—’

‘Sir, I demand that General Kroy apologise—’

The best form of defence seemed to West to be an immediate attack. ‘It would be traditional!’ he cut in at the top of his voice, ‘for us first to congratulate our commanding officer on his victory!’ He began to clap, slowly and deliberately. Pike and Jalenhorm joined him without delay. Poulder and Kroy exchanged an icy glance, then they too raised their hands.

‘May I be the first to—’

‘The very first to congratulate you, Lord Marshal!’

Their staffs joined in, and others around the tent, and then more further away, and soon a rousing cheer was going up.

‘A cheer for Lord Marshal Burr!’

‘The Lord Marshal!’

‘Victory!’

Burr himself twitched and quivered, one hand clutched to his stomach, his face a mask of anguish. West slunk backwards, away from the attention, away from the glory. He had not the slightest interest in it. That had been close, he knew, impossibly close. His hands were trembling, his mouth tasted sour, his vision was swimming. He could still hear Poulder and Kroy, already arguing again, like a pair of furious ducks quacking.

‘We must move on Dunbrec immediately, a swift assault while they are unwary and—’

‘Pah! Foolishness! The defences are too strong. We must surround the walls and prepare for a lengthy—’

‘Nonsense! My division could carry the place tomorrow!’

‘Rubbish! We must dig in! Siegecraft is my particular area of expertise!’

And on, and on. West rubbed his fingertips in his ears, trying to block out the voices as he stumbled through the churned-up mud. A few paces further on and he clambered around a rocky outcrop, pressed his back to it and slowly slid down. Slid down until he was sitting hunched in the snow, hugging his knees, the way he used to do when he was a child, and his father was angry.

Down in the valley, in the gathering gloom, he could see men moving over the battlefield. Already starting to dig the graves.

A Fitting Punishment

It had been raining, not long ago, but it had stopped. The paving of the Square of Marshals was starting to dry, the flag-stones light round the edges, dark with damp in the centres. A ray of watery sun had finally broken through the clouds and was glinting on the bright metal of the chains hanging from the frame, on the blades, and hooks, and pincers of the instruments on their rack. *Fine weather for it, I suppose. It should be quite the event. Unless your name is Tulkis, of course, then it might be one you'd rather miss.*

The crowd were certainly anticipating a thrill. The wide square was full of their chattering, a heady mixture of excitement and anger, happiness and hate. The public area was packed shoulder to shoulder, and still filling, but there was ample room here in the government enclosure, fenced in and well guarded right in front of the scaffold. *The great and the good must have the best view, after all.* Over the shoulders of the row in front he could see the chairs where the members of the Closed Council were sitting. If he went up on his toes, an operation he dared not try too often, he could just see the Arch Lector's shock of white hair, stirred gracefully by the breeze.

He glanced sideways at Ardee. She was frowning grimly up at the scaffold, chewing slowly at her lower lip. *To think. The time was I would take young women to the finest establishments in the city, to the pleasure gardens on the hill, to concerts at the Hall of Whispers, or straight to my quarters, of course, if I thought I could manage it. Now I take them to executions.* He felt the tiniest of smiles at the corner of his mouth. *Ah well, things change.*

'How will it be done?' she asked him.

'He'll be hung and emptied.'

'What?'

'He will be lifted up by chains around his wrists and neck, not quite tight enough to kill him through strangulation. Then he will be opened with a blade, and gradually disembowelled. His entrails will be displayed to the crowd.'

She swallowed. 'He'll be alive?'

'Possibly. Hard to say. Depends whether the executioners do their job properly. Anyway, he won't live long.' *Not without his guts.*

'Seems . . . extreme.'

'It is meant to be. It was the most savage punishment our savage forebears could dream up. Reserved for those who attempt harm to the royal person. Not carried out, I understand, for some eighty years.'

'Hence the crowd.'

Glokta shrugged. 'It's a curiosity, but you always get a good showing for an execution. People love to see death. It reminds them that however mean, however low, however horrible their lives become . . . at least they have one.'

Glokta felt a tap on his shoulder and looked round, with some pain, to see

Severard's masked face hovering just behind him. 'I dealt with that thing. That thing about Vitari.'

'Huh. And?'

Severard's eyes slid suspiciously sideways to Ardee, then he leaned forward to whisper in Glokta's ear. 'I followed her to a house, down below Galt's Green, near the market there.'

'I know it. And?'

'I took a peek in through a window.'

Glokta raised an eyebrow. 'You're enjoying this, aren't you? What was in there?'

'Children.'

'Children?' muttered Glokta.

'Three little children. Two girls and a boy. And what colour do you suppose their hair was?'

You don't say. 'Not flaming red, by any chance?'

'Just like their mother.'

'She's got children?' Glokta licked thoughtfully at his gums. 'Who'd have thought it?'

'I know. I thought that bitch had a block of ice for a cunt.'

That explains why she was so keen to get back from the South. All that time, she had three little ones waiting. The mothering instinct. How terribly touching. He wiped some wet from beneath his stinging left eye. 'Well done, Severard, this could be useful. What about that other thing? The Prince's guard?'

Severard lifted his mask for a moment and scratched underneath it, eyes darting nervously around. 'That's a strange one. I tried but . . . it seems he's gone missing.'

'Missing?'

'I spoke to his family. They haven't seen him since the day before the Prince died.'

Glokta frowned. 'The day before?' *But he was there . . . I saw him.* 'Get Frost, and Vitari too. Get me a list of everyone who was in the palace that night. Every lord, every servant, every soldier. I am getting to the truth of this.' *One way or another.*

'Did Sult tell you to?'

Glokta looked round sharply. 'He didn't tell me not to. Just get it done.'

Severard muttered something, but his words were lost as the noise of the crowd suddenly swelled in a wave of angry jeering. Tulkis was being led out onto the scaffold. He shuffled forwards, chains rattling round his ankles. He did not cry or wail, nor did he yell in defiance. He simply looked drawn, and sad, and in some pain. There were light bruises round his face, tracks of angry red spots down his arms and legs, across his chest. *Impossible to use hot needles without leaving some marks, but he looks well, considering.* He was naked aside from a cloth tied round his waist. *To spare the delicate sensibilities of the ladies present. Watching a man's entrails spilling out is excellent entertainment, but the sight of his cock, well, that would be obscene.*

A clerk stepped to the front of the scaffold and started reading out the prisoner's name, the nature of the charge, the terms of his confession and his punishment, but even at this distance he could hardly be heard for the sullen

muttering of the crowd, punctuated by an occasional furious scream. Glokta grimaced and worked his leg slowly back and forth, trying to loosen the cramping muscles.

The masked executioners stepped forward and took hold of the prisoner, moving with careful skill. They pulled a black bag over the envoy's head, snapped manacles shut around his neck, his wrists, his ankles. Glokta could see the canvas moving in and out in front of his mouth. *The desperate last breaths. Does he pray, now? Does he curse and rage? Who can know, and what difference can it make?*

They hoisted him up into the air, spreadeagled on the frame. Most of his weight was on his arms. Enough on the collar round his neck to choke him, not quite enough to kill. He struggled somewhat, of course. *Entirely natural. An animal instinct to climb, to writhe, to wriggle out and breathe free. An instinct that cannot be resisted.* One of the executioners went to the rack, pulled out a heavy blade, displayed it to the crowd with a flourish, the thin sun flashing briefly on its edge. He turned his back on the audience, and began to cut.

The crowd went silent. Almost deathly still, aside from the odd hushed whisper. It was a punishment that brooked no calling out. A punishment which demanded awestruck silence. A punishment to which there could be no response other than a horrified, fascinated staring. *That is its design.* So there was only silence, and perhaps the wet gurgling of the prisoner's breath. *Since the collar makes screaming impossible.*

'A fitting punishment, I suppose,' whispered Ardee as she watched the envoy's bloody gut slithering out of his body, 'for the murderer of the Crown Prince.'

Glokta bowed his head to whisper in her ear. 'I'm reasonably sure that he did not kill anyone. I suspect he is guilty of nothing more than being a courageous man, who came to us speaking truth and holding out the hand of peace.'

Her eyes widened. 'Then why hang him?'

'Because the Crown Prince has been murdered. Someone has to hang.'

'But . . . who really killed Raynault?'

'Someone who wants no peace between Gurkhul and the Union. Someone who wants the war between us to grow, and spread, and never end.'

'Who could want that?'

Glokta said nothing. *Who indeed?*

You don't have to admire that Fallow character, but he can certainly pick a good chair. Glokta settled back into the soft upholstery with a sigh, stretching his feet out towards the fire, working his aching ankles round and round in clicking circles.

Ardee did not seem quite so comfortable. *But then this morning's diversion was hardly a comforting spectacle.* She stood frowning out of the window, thoughtful, one hand pulling nervously at a strand of hair. 'I need a drink.' She went to the cabinet and opened it, took out a bottle and a glass. She paused, and looked round. 'Aren't you going to tell me it's a little early in the day?'

Glokta shrugged. 'You know what the time is.'

'I need something, after that . . .'

'Then have something. You don't need to explain yourself to me. I'm not your brother.'

She jerked her head round and gave him a hard look, opened her mouth as though about to speak, then she shoved the bottle angrily away and the glass after it, snapped the doors of the cabinet shut. 'Happy?'

He shrugged. 'About as close as I get, since you ask.'

Ardee dumped herself into a chair opposite, staring sourly down at one shoe. 'What happens now?'

'Now? Now we will delight each other with humorous observations for a lazy hour, then a stroll into town?' He winced. 'Slowly, of course. Then a late lunch, perhaps, I was thinking of—'

'I meant about the succession.'

'Oh,' muttered Glokta. 'That.' He reached round and dragged a cushion into a better position, then stretched out further with a satisfied grunt. *One could almost pretend, sitting in this warm and comfortable room, in such attractive and agreeable company, that one still had some kind of life.* He nearly had a smile on his face as he continued. 'There will be a vote in Open Council. Meaning, I have no doubt, that there will be an orgy of blackmail, bribery, corruption and betrayal. A carnival of deal-making, alliance-breaking, intrigue and murder. A merry dance of fixing, of rigging, of threats and of promises. It will go on until the king dies. *Then* there will be a vote in Open Council.'

Ardee gave her crooked smile. 'Even commoners' daughters are saying the king cannot live long.'

'Well, well,' and Glokta raised his eyebrows. 'Once the commoners' daughters start saying a thing, you know it must be true.'

'Who are the favourites?'

'Why don't you tell me who the favourites are?'

'Alright, then, I will.' She sat back, one fingertip rubbing thoughtfully at her jaw. 'Brock, of course.'

'Of course.'

'Then Barezin, I suppose, Heugen, and Isher.'

Glokta nodded. *She's no fool.* 'They're the big four. Who else, do we think?'

'I suppose Meed sunk his chances when he lost to the Northmen. What about Skald, the Lord Governor of Starikland?'

'Very good. You could get long odds for him, but he'd be on the sheet—'

'And if the Midderland candidates split the vote enough—'

'Who knows what could happen?' They grinned at each other for a moment. 'At this point it really could be anyone,' he said. 'And then any illegitimate children of the king might also be considered . . .'

'Bastards? Are there any?'

Glokta raised an eyebrow. 'I believe I could point out a couple.' She laughed, and he congratulated himself on it. 'There are rumours, of course, as there always are. Carmee dan Roth, have you heard of her? A lady-at-court, and reckoned an exceptional beauty. She was quite a favourite with the king at one point, years ago. She disappeared suddenly and was later said to have died, perhaps in childbirth, but who can say? People love to gossip, and beautiful young women will die from time to time, without ever bearing a

royal bastard.'

'Oh, it's true, it's true!' Ardee fluttered her eyelashes and pretended to swoon. 'We certainly are a sickly breed.'

'You are, my dear, you are. Looks are a curse. I thank my stars every day to have been cured of that.' And he leered his toothless grin at her. 'Members of the Open Council are flooding to the city in their scores, and I daresay many of them have never set foot in the Lords' Round in their lives. They smell power, and they want to be a part of it. They want to get something out of it, while there's something to be had. It might well be the only time in ten generations that the nobles get to make a real decision.'

'But what a decision,' muttered Ardee, shaking her head.

'Indeed. The race could be lengthy and the competition near the front will be savage.' *If not to say lethal.* 'I would not like to discount the possibility of some outsider coming up at the last moment. Someone without enemies. A compromise candidate.'

'What about the Closed Council?'

'They're forbidden from standing, of course, to ensure impartiality. ' He snorted. 'Impartiality! What they passionately want is to foist some nobody on the nation. Someone they can dominate and manipulate, so they can continue their private feuds uninterrupted.'

'Is there such a candidate?'

'Anyone with a vote is an option, so in theory there are hundreds, but of course the Closed Council cannot agree on one, and so they scramble with scant dignity behind the stronger candidates, changing their loyalties day by day, hoping to insure their futures, doing their best to stay in office. Power has shifted so quickly from them to the nobles their heads are spinning. And some of them will roll one way or another, you may depend on that.'

'Will yours roll, do you think?' asked Ardee, looking up at him from under her dark brows.

Glokta licked slowly at his gums. 'If Sult's does, it may well be that mine will follow.'

'I hope not. You've been kind to me. Kinder than anyone else. Kinder than I deserve.' It was a trick of utter frankness that he had seen her use before, but still an oddly disarming one.

'Nonsense,' mumbled Glokta, wriggling his shoulders in the chair, suddenly awkward. *Kindness, honesty, comfortable living rooms . . . Colonel Glokta would have known what to say, but I am a stranger here.* He was still groping for a reply when a sharp knocking echoed in the hallway. 'Are you expecting anyone?'

'Who would I be expecting? My entire acquaintance is here in the room.'

Glokta strained to listen as the front door opened, but could hear nothing more than vague muttering. The door handle turned and the maid poked her head into the room.

'Begging your pardon, but there is a visitor for the Superior.'

'Who?' snapped Glokta. *Severard, with news of Prince Raynault's guard? Vitari, with some message from the Arch Lector? Some new problem that needs solving? Some new set of questions to ask?*

'He says his name is Mauthis.'

Glokta felt the whole left side of his face twitching. Mauthis? He had not thought about him for some time, but an image of the gaunt banker sprang instantly into his mind now, holding out the receipt, neatly and precisely, for Glokta to sign. *A receipt for a gift of one million marks. It may be that in the future, a representative of the banking house of Valint and Balk will come to you requesting . . . favours.*

Ardee was frowning over at him. 'Something wrong?'

'No, nothing,' he croaked, striving to keep his voice from sounding strangled. 'An old associate. Could you give me the room for a moment? I need to talk with this gentleman.'

'Of course.' She got up and started to walk to the door, her dress swishing on the carpet behind her. She paused halfway, looked over her shoulder, biting her lip. She went to the cabinet and opened it, pulled out the bottle and the glass. She shrugged her shoulders. 'I need something.'

'Don't we all,' whispered Glokta at her back as she went out.

Mauthis stepped through the door a moment later. The same sharp bones in his face, the same cold eyes in deep sockets. There was something changed in his demeanour, however. *A certain nervousness. A certain anxiety, perhaps?*

'Why, Master Mauthis, what an almost unbearable honour it is to—'

'You may dispense with the pleasantries, Superior.' His voice was shrill and grating as rusty hinges. 'I have no ego to bruise. I prefer to speak plainly.'

'Very well, what can I—'

'My employers, the banking house of Valint and Balk, are not pleased with your line of investigation.'

Glokta's mind raced. 'My line of investigation into what?'

'Into the murder of Crown Prince Raynault.'

'That investigation is concluded. I assure you that I have no—'

'Speaking plainly, Superior, they know. It would be easier for you to assume that they know everything. They usually will. The murder has been solved, with impressive speed and competence, I may say. My employers are delighted with the results. The guilty man has been brought to justice. No one will benefit from your delving any deeper into this unfortunate business.'

That is speaking very plainly indeed. But why would Valint and Balk mind my questions? They gave me money to frustrate the Gurkish, now they seem to object to my investigating a Gurkish plot? It makes no sense . . . unless the killer did not come from the South at all. Unless Prince Raynault's murderers are much closer to home . . .

'There are some loose ends that need to be tied,' Glokta managed to mumble. 'There is no need for your employers to be angry—'

Mauthis took a step forward. His forehead was glistening with sweat, though the room was not hot. 'They are not angry, Superior. You could not have known that they would be displeased. Now you know. Were you to continue with this line of investigation, knowing that they are displeased . . . then they would be angry.' He leaned down towards Glokta and almost whispered. 'Please allow me to tell you, Superior, as one piece on the board to another. We do not want them angry.' There was a strange note in his voice. *He does not threaten me. He pleads.*

'Are you implying,' Glokta murmured, scarcely moving his lips, 'that they

would inform Arch Lector Sult of their little gift to the defence of Dagoska?’

‘That is the very least of what they would do.’ Mauthis’ expression was unmistakable. *Fear*. Fear, in that emotionless mask of a face. Something about it left a certain bitterness on Glokta’s tongue, a certain coldness down his back, a certain tightness in his throat. It was a feeling he remembered, from long ago. It was the closest he had come to being afraid, himself, in a long time. *They have me. Utterly and completely. I knew it when I signed. That was the price, and I had no choice but to pay.*

Glokta swallowed. ‘You may tell your employers that there will be no further enquiries.’

Mauthis closed his eyes for a moment and blew out with evident relief. ‘I am delighted to carry that message back to them. Good day.’ And he turned and left Glokta alone in Ardee’s living room, staring at the door, and wondering what had just happened.

The Abode of Stones

The prow of the boat crunched hard into the rocky beach and stones groaned and scraped along the underside. Two of the oarsmen floundered out into the washing surf and dragged the boat a few steps further. Once it was firmly grounded they hurried back in as though the water caused intense pain. Jezal could not entirely blame them. The island at the edge of the World, the ultimate destination of their journey, the place called Shabulyan, had indeed a most forbidding appearance.

A vast mound of stark and barren rock, the cold waves clutching at its sharp promontories and clawing at its bare beaches. Above rose jagged cliffs and slopes of treacherous scree, piled steeply upwards into a menacing mountain, looming black against the dark sky.

‘Care to come ashore?’ asked Bayaz of the sailors.

The four oarsmen showed no sign of moving, and their Captain slowly shook his head. ‘We have heard bad things of this island,’ he grunted in common so heavily accented it was barely intelligible. ‘They say it is cursed. We will wait for you here.’

‘We may be some time.’

‘We will wait.’

Bayaz shrugged. ‘Wait, then.’ He stepped from the boat and waded through knee-high breakers. Slowly and somewhat reluctantly the rest of the party followed him through the icy sea and up onto the beach.

It was a bleak and blasted place, a place fit only for stones and cold water. Waves foamed greedily up the shore and sucked jealously back out through the shingle. A pitiless wind cut across this wasteland and straight through Jezal’s wet trousers, whipping his hair in his eyes and chilling him to the marrow. It snatched away any trace of excitement he might have felt at reaching the end of their journey. It found chinks and holes in the boulders and made them sing, and sigh, and wail in a mournful choir.

There was precious little vegetation. Some colourless grass, ill with salt, some thorny bushes more dead than alive. A few clumps of withered trees, higher up away from the sea, clung desperately to the unyielding stone, curved and bent over in the direction of the wind as though they might be torn away at any moment. Jezal felt their pain.

‘A charming spot!’ he shouted, his words flying off into the gale as soon as they left his lips. ‘If you are an enthusiast for rocks!’

‘Where does the wise man hide a stone?’ Bayaz hurled back at him. ‘Among a thousand stones! Among a million!’

There certainly was no shortage of stones here. Boulders, rocks, pebbles and gravel also were in abundant supply. It was the profound lack of anything else that rendered the place so singularly unpleasant. Jezal glanced back over his shoulder, feeling a sudden stab of panic at the notion of the four oarsmen

shoving the boat back out to sea and leaving them marooned.

But they were still where they had been, their skiff rocking gently near the beach. Beyond them, on the churning ocean, Cawneil's ill-made tub of a ship sat at anchor, its sails lowered, its mast a black line against the troubled sky, moving slowly back and forward with the stirring of the uneasy waves.

'We need to find somewhere out of the wind!' Logen bellowed.

'Is there anywhere out of the wind in this bloody place?' Jezal shouted back.

'There'll have to be! We need a fire!'

Longfoot pointed up towards the cliffs. 'Perhaps up there we might find a cave, or a sheltered spot. I will lead you!'

They clambered up the beach, first sliding in the shingle, then hopping from teetering rock to rock. The edge of the World hardly seemed worth all the effort, as far as final destinations went. They could have found cold stone and cold water in plenty without ever leaving the North. Logen had a bad feeling about this barren place, but there was no point in saying so. He'd had a bad feeling for the last ten years. Call on this spirit, find this Seed, and then away, and quickly. What then, though? Back to the North? Back to Bethod, and his sons, racks full of scores and rivers of bad blood? Logen winced. None of that held much appeal. Better to do it, than to live in fear of it, his father would have said, but then his father said all kinds of things, and a lot of them weren't much use.

He looked over at Ferro, and she looked back. She didn't frown, she didn't smile. He'd never been much at understanding women, of course, or anyone else, but Ferro was some new kind of riddle. She acted just as cold and angry by day as she ever had, but most nights now she still seemed to find her way under his blanket. He didn't understand it and he didn't dare ask. The sad fact was, she was about the best thing he'd had in his life for a long time. He puffed his cheeks out and scratched his head. That didn't say much for his life, now he thought about it.

They found a kind of cave at the base of the cliffs. More of a hollow really, in the lee of two great boulders, where the wind didn't blast quite so strongly. Not much of a place for a conversation, but the island was a wasteland and Logen saw little chance of finding a better. You have to be realistic, after all.

Ferro took her sword to a stunted tree nearby and soon they had enough sticks to make an effort at a flame. Logen hunched over and fumbled the tinderbox out with numb fingers. Draughts blew in around the rocks and the wood was damp, but after much cursing and fumbling with the flint he finally managed to light a fire fit for the purpose. They huddled in around it.

'Bring out the box,' said Bayaz, and Logen hauled the heavy thing out from his pack and set it down next to Ferro with a grunt. Bayaz felt around its edge with his fingertips, found some hidden catch and the lid lifted silently. There were a set of metal coils underneath, pointing in from all sides to leave a space the size of Logen's fist.

'What are they for?' he asked.

'To keep what is inside still and well-cushioned.'

'It needs to be cushioned?'

'Kanedias thought so.' That answer did not make Logen feel any better. 'Place it inside as soon as you are able,' said the Magus, turning to Ferro. 'We do not wish to be exposed to it for longer than we must. It is best that you all keep your distance.' And he ushered the others back with his palms. Luthar and Longfoot nearly scrambled over each other in their eagerness to get away, but Quai's eyes were fixed on the preparations and he scarcely moved.

Logen sat cross-legged in front of the flickering fire, feeling the weight of worry in his stomach growing steadily heavier. He was starting to regret ever getting involved with this business, but it was a bit late now for second thoughts. 'Something to offer them will help,' he said, looking round, and found Bayaz already holding a metal flask out. Logen unscrewed the cap and took a sniff. The smell of strong spirits greeted his nostrils like a sorely missed lover. 'You had this all the time?'

Bayaz nodded. 'For this very purpose.'

'Wish I'd known. I could've put it to good use more than once.'

'You can put it to good use now.'

'Not quite the same thing.' Logen tipped the flask up and took a mouthful, resisted a powerful urge to swallow, puffed out his cheeks and blew it out in a mist over the fire, sending up a gout of flame.

'And now?' asked Bayaz.

'Now we wait. We wait until—'

'I am here, Ninefingers.' A voice like the wind through the rocks, like the stones falling from the cliffs, like the sea draining through the gravel. The spirit loomed over them in their shallow cave among the stones, a moving pile of grey rock as tall as two men, casting no shadow.

Logen raised his eyebrows. The spirits never answered promptly, if they bothered to answer at all. 'That was quick.'

'I have been waiting.'

'A long time, I reckon.' The spirit nodded. 'Well, er, we've come for—'

'For that thing that the sons of Euz entrusted to me. There must be desperate business in the world of men for you to seek it out.'

Logen swallowed. 'When isn't there?'

'Do you see anything?' Jezal whispered behind him.

'Nothing,' replied Longfoot. 'It is indeed a most remarkable—'

'Shut your mouths!' snarled Bayaz over his shoulder.

The spirit loomed down close over him. 'This is the First of the Magi.'

'It is,' said Logen, keeping the talk to the point.

'He is shorter than Juvens. I do not like his look.'

'What does it say?' snapped Bayaz impatiently, staring into the air well to the left of the spirit.

Logen scratched his face. 'It says that Juvens was tall.'

'Tall? What of it? Get what we came for and let us be gone!'

'He is impatient,' rumbled the spirit.

'We've come a long way. He has Juvens' staff.'

The spirit nodded. 'The dead branch is familiar to me. I am glad. I have held this thing for long winters, and it has been a heavy weight to carry. Now I will sleep.'

'Good idea. If you could—'

'I will give it to the woman.'

The spirit dug its hand into its stony stomach and Logen shuffled back warily. The fist emerged, and something was clutched inside, and he felt himself shiver as he saw it.

'Hold your hands out,' he muttered to Ferro.

Jezal gave an involuntary gasp and scrambled away as the thing dropped down into Ferro's waiting palms, raising an arm to shield his face, his mouth hanging open with horror. Bayaz stared, eyes wide. Quai craned eagerly forward. Logen grimaced and rocked back. Longfoot scrambled almost all the way out of the hollow. For a long moment all six of them stared at the dark object in Ferro's hands, no one moving, no one speaking, no sound except for the keening wind. There it was, before them. That thing which they had come so far, and braved so many dangers to find. That thing which Glustrod dug from the deep earth long years ago. That thing which had made a blasted ruin of the greatest city in the world.

The Seed. The Other Side, made flesh. The very stuff of magic.

Then Ferro slowly began to frown. 'This is it?' she asked doubtfully. 'This is the thing that will turn Shaffa to dust?'

It did, in fact, now that Jezal was overcoming the shock of its sudden appearance, look like nothing more than a stone. A chunk of unremarkable grey rock the size of a big fist. No sense of unearthly danger washed from it. No deadly power was evident. No withering rays or stabs of lightning shot forth. It did, in fact, look like nothing more than a stone.

Bayaz blinked. He shuffled closer, on his hands and knees. He peered down at the object in Ferro's palms. He licked his lips, lifting his hand ever so slowly while Jezal watched, his heart pounding in his ears. Bayaz touched the rock with his little finger tip then jerked it instantly back. He did not suddenly wither and expire. He probed it once more with his finger. There was no thunderous detonation. He pressed his palm upon it. He closed his thick fingers round it. He lifted it up. And still, it looked like nothing more than a stone.

The First of the Magi stared down at the thing in his hand, his eyes growing wider and wider. 'This is not it,' he whispered, his lip trembling. 'This is just a stone!'

There was a stunned silence. Jezal stared at Logen, and the Northman gazed back, scarred face slack with confusion. Jezal stared at Longfoot, and the Navigator could only shrug his bony shoulders. Jezal stared at Ferro, and he watched her frown grow harder and harder. 'Just a stone?' she muttered.

'Not it?' hissed Quai.

'Then . . .' The meaning of Bayaz' words was only just starting to sink into Jezal's mind. 'I came all this way . . . for nothing?' A sudden gust blew up, snuffing out the miserable tongue of flame and blowing grit in his face.

'Perhaps there is some mistake,' ventured Longfoot. 'Perhaps there is another spirit, perhaps there is another—'

'No mistake,' said Logen, firmly shaking his head.

'But . . .' Quai's eyes were bulging from his ashen face. 'But . . . how?'

Bayaz ignored him, muscles working on the side of his head. 'Kanedias. His hand is in this. He found some way to trick his brothers, and switch this lump of nothing for the Seed, and keep it for himself. Even in death, the Maker denies me!'

'Just a stone?' growled Ferro.

'I gave up my chance to fight for my country,' murmured Jezal, indignation starting to flicker up in his chest, 'and I slogged hundreds of miles across the wasteland, and I was beaten, and broken, and left scarred . . . for nothing?'

'The Seed.' Quai's pale lips were curling back from his teeth, his breath snorting fast through his nose. 'Where is it? Where?'

'If I knew that,' barked his master, 'do you suppose we would be sitting here on this forsaken island, bantering with spirits for a chunk of worthless rock?' And he lifted his arm and dashed the stone furiously onto the ground. It cracked open and split into fragments, and they bounced, and tumbled, and clattered down among a hundred others, a thousand others, a million others the same.

'It's not here.' Logen shook his head sadly. 'Say one thing for—'

'Just a stone?' snarled Ferro, her eyes swivelling from the fallen chunks of rock to Bayaz' face. 'You fucking old liar!' She sprang up, fists clenched tight by her sides. 'You promised me vengeance!'

Bayaz rounded on her, his face twisted with rage. 'You think I have no greater worries than your *vengeance*?' he roared, flecks of spit flying from his lips and out into the rushing gale. 'Or your *disappointment*?' he screamed in Quai's face, veins bulging in his neck. 'Or your fucking *looks*?' Jezal swallowed and faded back into the hollow, trying to seem as small as he possibly could, his own anger extinguished by Bayaz' towering rage as sharply as the meagre fire had been by the blasting wind a moment before. 'Tricked!' snarled the First of the Magi, his hands opening and closing with aimless fury. 'With what now will I fight Khalul?'

Jezal winced and cowered, sure at any moment that one of the party would be ripped apart, or be flung through the air and dashed on the rocks, or would burst into brilliant flames, quite possibly him. Brother Longfoot chose a poor moment to try and calm matters. 'We should not be downhearted, my comrades! The journey is its own reward—'

'Say that once more, you shaven dolt!' hissed Bayaz. 'Only once more, and I'll make ashes of you!' The Navigator shrank trembling away, and the Magus snatched up his staff and stalked off, down from the hollow towards the beach, his coat flailing around him in the bitter wind. So terrible had his fury been that, for a brief moment, the idea of staying on the island seemed preferable to getting back into a boat with him.

It was with that ill-tempered outburst, Jezal supposed, that their quest was declared an utter failure.

'Well then,' murmured Logen, after they had all sat in the wind for a while longer. 'I reckon that's it.' He snapped the lid of the Maker's empty box shut. 'No point crying about it. You have to be—'

'Shut your fucking mouth, fool!' snarled Ferro at him. 'Don't tell me what I have to be!' And she strode out of the hollow and down towards the hissing sea.

Logen winced as he pushed the box back into his pack, sighed as he swung it up onto his shoulder. 'Realistic,' he muttered, then set off after her. Longfoot and Quai came next, all sullen anger and silent disappointment. Jezal came up the rear, stepping from one jagged stone to another, eyes nearly shut against the wind, turning the whole business over in his mind. The mood might have been deathly sombre, but as he picked his way back towards the boat, he found to his surprise that he was almost unable to keep the smile from his face. After all, success or failure in this mad venture had never really meant anything to him. All that mattered was that he was on his way home.

The water slapped against the prow, throwing up cold white spray. The sailcloth bulged and snapped, the beams and the ropes creaked. The wind whipped at Ferro's face but she narrowed her eyes and ignored it. Bayaz had gone below decks in a fury and one by one the others had followed him out of the cold. Only she and Ninefingers stayed there, looking down at the sea.

'What will you do now?' he asked her.

'Go wherever I can kill the Gurmish.' She snapped it without thinking. 'I will find other weapons and fight them wherever I can.' She hardly even knew if it was true. It was hard to feel the hatred as she had done. It no longer seemed so important a matter if the Gurmish were left to their business, and she to hers, but her doubts and her disappointment only made her bark it the more fiercely. 'Nothing has changed. I still need vengeance.'

Silence.

She glanced sideways, and she saw Ninefingers frowning down at the pale foam on the dark water, as if her answer had not been the one he had been hoping for. It would have been easy to change it. 'I'll go where you go,' she could have said, and who would have been worse off? No one. Certainly not her. But Ferro did not have it in her to put herself in his power like that. Now it came to the test there was an invisible wall between them. One that there was no crossing.

There always had been.

All she could say was, 'You?' He seemed to think about it a while, angry-looking, chewing at his lip. 'I should go back to the North.' He said it unhappily, without even looking at her. 'There's work there I should never have left. Dark work, that needs doing. That's where I'll go, I reckon. Back to the North, and settle me some scores.'

She frowned. Scores? Who was it told her you had to have more than vengeance. Now scores was all he wanted? Lying bastard. 'Scores,' she hissed. 'Good.'

And the word was sour as sand on her tongue.

He looked her in the eye for a long moment. He opened his mouth, as if he was about to speak, and he stayed there, his lips formed into a word, one hand part-way lifted towards her.

Then he seemed suddenly to slump, and he set his jaw, and he turned his shoulder to her and leaned back on the rail. 'Good.'

And that easily it was all done between them.

Ferro scowled as she turned away. She curled up her fists and felt her nails

digging into her palms, furious hard. She cursed to herself, and bitterly. Why could she not have said different words? Some breath, and a shape of the mouth, and everything is changed. It would have been easy.

Except that Ferro did not have it in her, and she knew she never would have. The Gurmish had killed that part of her, far away, and long ago, and left her dead inside. She had been a fool to hope, and in her bones she had known it all along.

Hope is for the weak.

Back to the Mud

Dogman and Dow, Tul and Grim, West and Pike. Six of them, stood in a circle and looking down at two piles of cold earth. Below in the valley, the Union were busy burying their own dead, Dogman had seen it. Hundreds of 'em, in pits for a dozen each. It was a bad day for men, all in all, and a good one for the ground. Always the way, after a battle. Only the ground wins.

Shivers and his Carls were just through the trees, heads bowed, burying their own. Twelve in the earth already, three more wounded bad enough they'd most likely follow before the week was out, and another that'd lost his hand – might live, might not, depending on his luck. Luck hadn't been good lately. Near half their number dead in one day's work. Brave of 'em to stick after that. Dogman could hear their words. Sad words and proud, for the fallen. How they'd been good men, how they'd fought well, how bad they'd be missed and all the rest. Always the way, after a battle. Words for the dead.

Dogman swallowed and looked back to the fresh turned dirt at his feet. Tough work digging, in the cold, ground frozen hard. Still, you're better off digging than getting buried, Logen would've said, and the Dogman reckoned that was right enough. Two people he'd just finished burying, and two parts of himself along with 'em. Cathil deep down under the piled-up dirt, stretched out white and cold and would never be warm again. Threetrees not far from her, his broken shield across his knees and his sword in his fist. Two sets of hopes Dogman had put in the mud – some hopes for the future, and some hopes from the past. All done now, and would never come to nothing, and they left an aching hole in him. Always the way, after a battle. Hopes in the mud.

'Buried where they died,' said Tul softly. 'That's fitting. That's good.'

'Good?' barked Dow, glaring over at West. 'Good, is it? Safest place in the whole battle? Safest place, did you tell 'em?' West swallowed and looked down, guilty seeming.

'Alright, Dow,' said Tul. 'You know better than to blame him for this, or anyone else. It's a battle. Folk die. Threetrees knew that well enough, none better.'

'We could've been somewhere else,' growled Dow.

'We could've been,' said Dogman, 'but we weren't, and there it is. No changing it, is there? Threetrees is dead, and the girl's dead, and that's hard enough for everyone. Don't need you adding to the burden.'

Dow's fists bunched up and he took a deep breath in like he was about to shout something. Then he let it out, and his shoulders sagged, and his head fell. 'You're right. Nothing to be done, now.'

Dogman reached out and touched Pike on his arm. 'You want to say something for her?' The burned man looked at him, then shook his head. He wasn't much for speaking, the Dogman reckoned, and he hardly blamed him.

Didn't look like West was about to say nothing either, so Dogman cleared his throat, wincing at the pain across his ribs, and tried it himself. Someone had to.

'This girl we buried here, Cathil was her name. Can't say I knew her too long, or nothing, but what I knew I liked . . . for what that's worth. Not much I reckon. Not much. But she had some bones to her, I guess we all saw that on the way north. Took the cold and the hunger and the rest and never grumbled. Wish I'd known her better. Hoped to, but, well, don't often get what you hope for. She weren't one of us, really, but she died with us, so I reckon we're proud to have her in the ground with ours.'

'Aye,' said Dow. 'Proud to have her.'

'That's right,' said Tul. 'Ground takes everyone the same.'

Dogman nodded, took a long ragged breath and blew it out. 'Anyone want to speak for Threetrees?'

Dow flinched and looked down at his boots, shifting 'em in the dirt. Tul blinked up at the sky, looking like he had a bit of damp in his eye. Dogman himself was only a stride away from weeping as it was. If he had to speak another word he knew he'd set to bawling like a child. Threetrees would have known what to say, but there was the trouble, he was gone. Seemed like no one had any words. Then Grim took a step forward.

'Rudd Threetrees,' he said, looking round at 'em one by one. 'Rock of Uffrith, they called him. No bigger name in all the North. Great fighter. Great leader. Great friend. Lifetime o' battles. Stood face to face with the Bloody-Nine, then shoulder to shoulder with him. Never took an easy path, if he thought it was the wrong one. Never stepped back from a fight, if he thought it had to be done. I stood with him, walked with him, fought with him, ten years, all over the North.' His face broke out in a smile. 'I've no complaints.'

'Good words, Grim,' said Dow, looking down at the cold earth. 'Good words.'

'There'll be no more like Threetrees,' muttered Tul, wiping his eye like he'd got something in it.

'Aye,' said the Dogman. That was all he could manage.

West turned and trudged off through the trees, his shoulders hunched up, not a word said. Dogman could see the muscles clenching in the side of his head. Blaming himself, most likely. Men liked to do that a lot when folk died, in the Dogman's experience, and West seemed the type for it. Pike followed him, and the two of them passed Shivers, coming up the other way.

He stopped beside the graves, frowning down, hair hanging round his face, then he looked up at them. 'Don't mean no disrespect. None at all. But we need a new chief.'

'The earth's only just turned on him,' hissed Dow, giving him the eye.

Shivers held up his hands. 'Best time to discuss it, then, I reckon. So there's no confusion. My boys are jumpy, being honest. They've lost friends, and they've lost Threetrees, and they need someone to look to, that's a fact. Who's it going to be?'

Dogman rubbed his face. He hadn't even thought about it yet, and now that he did he didn't know what to think. Tul Duru Thunderhead and Black Dow were two big, hard names, both led men before, and well. Dogman looked at

them, standing there, frowning at each other. 'I don't care which o' you it is,' he said. 'I'll follow either one. But it's clear as clear, it has to be one of you two.'

Tul glared down at Dow, and Dow glowered back up at him. 'I can't follow him,' rumbled Tul, 'and he won't follow me.'

'That's a fact,' hissed Dow. 'We talked it out already. Never work.'

Tul shook his head. 'That's why it can't be either one of us.'

'No,' said Dow. 'It can't be one of us.' He sucked at his teeth, snorted some snot into his face and spat it out onto the dirt. 'That's why it has to be you, Dogman.'

'That's why what now?' said Dogman, his eyes wide open and staring.

Tul nodded. 'You're the chief. We've all agreed it.'

'Uh,' said Grim, not even looking up.

'Ninefingers gone,' said Dow, 'and Threetrees gone, and that leaves you.'

Dogman winced. He was waiting for Shivers to say, 'You what? Him? Chief?' He was waiting for them all to start laughing, and tell him it was a joke. Black Dow, and Tul Duru Thunderhead, and Harding Grim, not to mention two dozen Carls besides, all taking his say-so. Stupidest idea he ever heard. But Shivers didn't laugh.

'That's a good choice, I reckon. Speaking for my lads, that's what I was going to suggest. I'll let 'em know.' And he turned and made off through the trees, with the Dogman gawping after him.

'But what about them others?' he hissed once Shivers was well out of hearing, wincing at a stab of pain in his ribs. 'There's twenty fucking Carls down there, and jumpy! They need a name to follow!'

'You got the name,' said Tul. 'You came across the mountains with Ninefingers, fought all those years with Bethod. There ain't no bigger names than yours left standing. You seen more battles than any of us.'

'Seen 'em, maybe—'

'You're the one,' said Dow, 'and that's all. So you ain't the hardest killer since Skarling, so what? Your hands are bloody enough for me to follow, and there's no better scout alive. You know how to lead. You've seen the best at it. Ninefingers, and Bethod, and Threetrees, you've watched 'em all, close as can be.'

'But I can't . . . I mean . . . I couldn't make no one charge, not the way Threetrees did—'

'No one could,' said Tul, nodding down at the earth. 'But Threetrees ain't an option no more, sorry to say. You're the chief, now, and we'll stand behind you. Any man don't care to do as you tell 'em can speak to us.'

'And that'll be one short-arsed conversation,' growled Dow.

'You're the chief.' Tul turned and strode off through the trees.

'It's decided.' And Black Dow followed him.

'Uh,' said Grim, shrugging his shoulders and making off with the other two.

'But,' muttered the Dogman. 'Hold on . . .'

They'd gone. So he guessed that made him chief.

He stood there for a moment, blinking, not knowing what to think. He was never leader before. He didn't feel no different. He didn't have any ideas, all of a sudden. No notions of what to tell men to do. He felt like an idiot. Even

more of one than usual.

He knelt down, between the graves, and he stuck his hand in the soil, and he felt it cold and wet around his fingers. 'Sorry, girl,' he muttered. 'Didn't deserve this.' He gripped the ground tight, and he squeezed it in his palm. 'Fare you well, Threetrees. I'll try and do what you'd have done. Back to the mud, old man.'

And he stood up, and he wiped his hand on his shirt, and he walked away, back to the living, and left the two of them behind him in the earth.

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Four people without whom . . .

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And who could forget . . .
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**JOE
ABERCROMBIE**

**Last Argument
of Kings**

'Delightfully twisted
and evil'

THE GUARDIAN

For the Four Readers

You know who you are

THE FIRST LAW: BOOK THREE

JOE
ABERCROMBIE

Last Argument Of Kings



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Acknowledgements

PART I

‘Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.’

Paul Gauguin

The Poison Trade

Superior Glokta stood in the hall, and waited. He stretched his twisted neck out to one side and then to the other, hearing the familiar clicks, feeling the familiar cords of pain stretching out through the tangled muscles between his shoulder-blades. *Why do I do it, when it always hurts me? Why must we test the pain? Tongue the ulcer, rub the blister, pick the scab?*

‘Well?’ he snapped.

The marble bust at the foot of the stairs offered only its silent contempt. *And I get more than enough of that already.* Glokta shuffled away, his useless foot scraping over the tiles behind him, the tapping of his cane echoing amongst the mouldings on the faraway ceiling.

When it came to the great noblemen on the Open Council, Lord Ingelstad, the owner of this oversized hall, was an undersized man indeed. The head of a family whose fortunes had declined with the passing years, whose wealth and influence had shrivelled to almost nothing. *And the more shrivelled the man, the more swollen his pretensions must become. Why do they never realise? Small things only seem smaller in large spaces.*

Somewhere in the shadows a clock vomited up a few sluggish chimes. *Good and late already. The more shrivelled the man, the longer the wait on his pleasure. But I can be patient, when I must. I have no dazzling banquets, no ecstatic crowds, no beautiful women waiting breathlessly for my arrival, after all. Not any more. The Gurkish saw to that, in the darkness beneath the Emperor’s prisons.* He pressed his tongue into his empty gums and grunted as he shifted his leg, needles from it shooting up his back and making his eyelid flicker. *I can be patient. The one good thing about every step being an ordeal. You soon learn how to tread carefully.*

The door beside him opened sharply and Glokta snapped his head round, doing his best to hide a grimace as his neck bones crunched. Lord Ingelstad stood in the doorway: a big, fatherly man with a ruddy complexion. He offered up a friendly smile as he beckoned Glokta into the room. *Quite as though this were a social call, and a welcome one at that.*

‘I must apologise for keeping you waiting, Superior. I have had so many visitors since I arrived in Adua, my head is in quite a spin!’ *Let us hope it doesn’t spin right off. ‘So very many visitors!’ Visitors with offers, no doubt. Offers for your vote. Offers for your help in choosing our next king. But my offer, I think, you will find painful to refuse. ‘Will you take wine, Superior?’*

‘No, my Lord, thank you.’ Glokta hobbled painfully over the threshold. ‘I will not stay long. I, too, have a great deal of business to attend to.’ *Elections don’t rig themselves, you know.*

‘Of course, of course. Please be seated.’ Ingelstad dropped happily into one of his chairs and gestured to another. It took Glokta a moment to get settled, lowering himself carefully, then shifting his hips until he discovered a position in which his back did not give him constant pain. ‘And what did you wish to

discuss with me?’

‘I have come on behalf of Arch Lector Sult. I hope you will not be offended if I am blunt, but his Eminence wants your vote.’

The nobleman’s heavy features twisted in feigned puzzlement. *Very badly feigned, as it goes.* ‘I am not sure that I understand. My vote on what issue?’

Glokta wiped some wet from beneath his leaking eye. *Must we engage in such undignified dancing? You have not the build for it, and I have not the legs.* ‘On the issue of who will next occupy the throne, Lord Ingelstad.’

‘Ah. That.’ Yes, *that*. Idiot. ‘Superior Glokta, I hope I will not disappoint you, or his Eminence, a man for whom I have nothing but the highest respect,’ and he bowed his head with an exaggerated show of humility, ‘when I say that I could not, in all good conscience, allow myself to be influenced in any one direction. I feel that I, and all the members of the Open Council, have been given a sacred trust. I am duty bound to vote for the man who seems to me to be the very finest candidate, from the many excellent men available.’ And he assumed a grin of the greatest self-satisfaction.

A fine speech. A village dunce might have even believed it. How often have I heard it, or its like, the past few weeks? Traditionally, the bargaining would come next. The discussion of how much, exactly, a sacred trust is worth. How much silver outweighs a good conscience. How much gold cuts through the bindings of duty. But I am not in a bargaining mood today.

Glokta raised his eyebrows very high, ‘I must congratulate you on a noble stand, Lord Ingelstad. If everyone had your character we would be living in a better world. A noble stand indeed . . . especially when you have so much to lose. No less than everything, I suppose.’ He winced as he took his cane in one hand and rocked himself painfully forward towards the edge of the chair. ‘But I see you will not be swayed, and so I take my leave—’

‘What can you refer to, Superior?’ The nobleman’s unease was written plainly across his plump face.

‘Why, Lord Ingelstad, to your corrupt business dealings.’

The ruddy cheeks had lost much of their glow. ‘There must be some mistake.’

‘Oh no, I assure you.’ Glokta slid the papers of confession from the inside pocket of his coat. ‘You are mentioned often in the confessions of senior Mercers, you see? Very often.’ And he held the crackling pages out so they both could see them. ‘Here you are referred to as – and not my choice of words, you understand – an “accomplice”. Here as the “prime beneficiary” of a most unsavoury smuggling operation. And here, you will note – and I almost blush to mention it – your name and the word “treason” appear in close proximity.’

Ingelstad sagged back into his chair and set his glass rattling down on the table beside him, a quantity of wine sloshing out onto the polished wood. *Oh, we really should wipe that up. It could leave an awful stain, and some stains are impossible to remove.*

‘His Eminence,’ continued Glokta, ‘counting you as a friend, was able to keep your name out of the initial enquiries, for everybody’s sake. He understands that you were merely trying to reverse the failing fortunes of your family, and is not without sympathy. If you were to disappoint him in this

business of votes, however, his sympathy would be quickly exhausted. Do you take my meaning?' *I feel that I have made it abundantly clear.*

'I do,' croaked Ingelstad.

'And the bonds of duty? Do they feel any looser, now?'

The nobleman swallowed, the flush quite vanished from his face. 'I am eager to assist his Eminence in any way possible, of course, but . . . the thing is—' *What now? A desperate offer? A despairing bribe? An appeal to my conscience, even?* 'A representative of High Justice Marovia came to me yesterday. A man called Harlen Morrow. He made very similar representations . . . and not dissimilar threats.' Glokta frowned. *Did he now? Marovia, and his little worm. Always just one step ahead, or just one step behind. But never far away.* A shrill note crept into Ingelstad's voice. 'What am I to do? I cannot support you both! I will leave Adua, Superior, and never return! I will . . . I will abstain from voting—'

'You'll do no such fucking thing!' hissed Glokta. 'You'll vote the way I tell you and Marovia be damned!' *More prodding? Distasteful, but so be it. Are my hands not filthy to the elbow? Rummaging through another sewer or two will scarcely make the difference.* He let his voice soften to an oily purr. 'I observed your daughters in the park, yesterday.' The nobleman's face lost its last vestige of colour. 'Three young innocents on the very cusp of womanhood, dressed all in the height of fashion, and each one lovelier than the last. The youngest would be . . . fifteen?'

'Thirteen,' croaked Ingelstad.

'Ah.' And Glokta let his lips curl back to display his toothless smile. 'She blooms early. They have never before visited Adua, am I correct?'

'They have not,' he nearly whispered.

'I thought not. Their excitement and delight as they toured the gardens of the Agriport were perfectly charming. I swear, they must have caught the eye of every eligible suitor in the capital.' He allowed his smile slowly to fade. 'It would break my heart, Lord Ingelstad, to see three such delicate creatures snatched suddenly away to one of England's harshest penal institutions. Places where beauty, and breeding, and a gentle disposition, attract an entirely different and far less enjoyable kind of attention.' Glokta gave a carefully orchestrated shudder of dismay as he leaned slowly forward to whisper. 'I would not wish that life on a dog. And all on account of the indiscretions of a father who had the means of reparation well within his grasp.'

'But my daughters, they were not involved—'

'We are electing a new king! Everyone is involved!' *Harsh, perhaps. But harsh times demand harsh actions.* Glokta struggled to his feet, hand wobbling on his cane with the effort. 'I will tell his Eminence that he can count on your vote.'

Ingelstad collapsed, suddenly and completely. *Like a stabbed wine-skin.* His shoulders sagged, his face hung loose with horror and hopelessness. 'But the High Justice . . .' he whispered. 'Have you no pity?'

Glokta could only shrug. 'I did have. As a boy I was soft-hearted beyond the point of foolishness. I swear, I would cry at a fly caught in a spider's web.' He grimaced at a brutal spasm through his leg as he turned for the door. 'Constant pain has cured me of that.'

It was an intimate little gathering. *But the company hardly inspires warmth.* Superior Goyle glared at Glokta from across the huge, round table in the huge, round office, his beady eyes staring from his bony face. *And not with tender feelings, I rather think.*

The attention of his Eminence the Arch Lector, the head of his Majesty's Inquisition, was fixed elsewhere. Pinned to the curving wall, taking up perhaps half of the entire chamber, were three hundred and twenty sheets of paper. *One for every great heart on our noble Open Council.* They crackled gently in the breeze from the great windows. *Fluttering little papers for fluttering little votes. Each one was marked with a name. Lord this, Lord that, Lord someone of wherever. Big men and little men. Men whose opinions, on the whole, no one cared a damn for until Prince Raynault fell out of his bed and into his grave.*

Many of the pages had a blob of coloured wax on their corner. Some had two, or even three. Allegiances. *Which way will they vote? Blue for Lord Brock, red for Lord Isher, black for Marovia, white for Sult, and so on. All subject to change, of course, depending which way the wind blows them.* Below were written lines of small, dense script. Too small for Glokta to read from where he was sitting, but he knew what they said. *Wife was once a whore. Partial to young men. Drinks too much for his good. Murdered a servant in a rage. Gambling debts he cannot cover. Secrets. Rumours. Lies. The tools of this noble trade. Three hundred and twenty names, and just as many sordid little stories, each one to be picked at, and dug out, and jabbed our way. Politics. Truly, the work of the righteous.*

So why do I do this? Why?

The Arch Lector had more pressing concerns. 'Brock still leads,' he murmured in a dour drone, staring at the shifting papers with his white gloved hands clasped behind his back. 'He has some fifty votes, more or less certain.' As certain as we can be in these uncertain times. 'Isher is not far behind, with forty or more to his name. Skald has made some recent gains, as far as we can tell. An unexpectedly ruthless man. He has the Starikland delegation more or less in his hand, which gives him thirty votes, perhaps, and Barezin about the same. They are the four main contenders, as things stand.'

But who knows? Perhaps the King will live another year, and by the time it comes to a vote we'll all have killed each other. Glokta had to stifle a grin at the thought. The Lords' Round heaped with richly-dressed corpses, every great nobleman in the Union and all twelve members of the Closed Council. *Each stabbed in the back by the man beside. The ugly truth of government . . .*

'Did you speak to Heugen?' snapped Sult.

Goyle tossed his balding head and sneered at Glokta with seething annoyance. 'Lord Heugen is still struggling under the delusion that he could be our next king, though he cannot certainly control more than a dozen chairs. He barely had time to hear our offer he was so busy scrabbling to coax out more votes. Perhaps in a week, or two, he will see reason. Then he might be encouraged to lean our way, but I wouldn't bet on it. More likely he'll throw in his lot with Isher. The two of them have always been close, I understand.'

'Good for them,' hissed Sult. 'What about Ingelstad?'

Glokta stirred in his seat. 'I presented him with your ultimatum in very

blunt terms, your Eminence.'

'Then we can count on his vote?'

How to put this? 'I could not say so with absolute certainty. High Justice Marovia was able to make threats almost identical to our own, through his man Harlen Morrow.'

'Morrow? Isn't he some lickspittle of Hoff's?'

'It would seem he has moved up in the world.' *Or down, depending on how you look at it.*

'He could be taken care of.' Goyle wore a most unsavoury expression. 'Quite easily—'

'No!' snapped Sult. 'Why is it, Goyle, that no sooner does a problem appear than you want to kill it! We must tread carefully for now, and show ourselves to be reasonable men, open to negotiation.' He strode to the window, the bright sunlight glittering purple through the great stone on his ring of office. 'Meanwhile the business of actually running the country is ignored. Taxes go uncollected. Crimes go unpunished. This bastard they call the Tanner, this demagogue, this traitor, speaks in public at village fairs, urging open rebellion! Daily now, peasants leave their farms and turn to banditry, perpetrating untold theft and damage. Chaos spreads, and we have not the resources to stamp it out. There are only two regiments of the King's Own left in Adua, scarcely enough to maintain order in the city. Who knows if one of our noble Lords will tire of waiting and decide to try and seize the crown prematurely? I would not put it past them!'

'Will the army return from the North soon?' asked Goyle.

'Unlikely. That oaf Marshal Burr has spent three months squatting outside Dunbrec, and given Bethod ample time to regroup beyond the Whiteflow. Who knows when he'll finally get the job done, if ever!' *Months spent destroying our own fortress. It almost makes one wish we'd put less effort into building the place.*

'Twenty-five votes.' The Arch Lector scowled at the crackling papers. 'Twenty-five, and Marovia has eighteen? We're scarcely making progress! For every vote we gain we lose one somewhere else!'

Goyle leaned forwards in his chair. 'Perhaps, your Eminence, the time has come to call again on our friend at the University—'

The Arch Lector hissed furiously, and Goyle snapped his mouth shut. Glokta looked out the great window, pretending that he had heard nothing out of the ordinary. The six crumbling spires of the University dominated the view. *But what help could anyone possibly find there? Amongst the decay, and the dust, from those old idiots of Adepti?*

Sult did not give him long to consider it. 'I will speak to Heugen myself.' And he jabbed one of the papers with a finger. 'Goyle, write to Lord Governor Meed and try to elicit his support. Glokta, arrange an interview with Lord Wetterlant. He has yet to declare himself one way or the other. Get out there, the pair of you.' Sult turned from his sheets full of secrets and fixed on Glokta with his hard blue eyes. 'Get out there and get . . . me . . . votes!'

Being Chief

Cold night!’ shouted the Dogman. ‘Thought it was meant to be summer!’ The three of ’em looked up. The nearest was an old man with grey hair and a face looked like it had seen some weather. Just past him was a younger man, missing his left arm above the elbow. The third was no more’n a boy, stood down the end of the quay and frowning out at the dark sea.

Dogman faked a nasty limp as he walked over, dragging one leg behind him and wincing like he was in pain. He shuffled under the lamp, dangling on its high pole with the warning bell beside it, and held up the jar so they could all see.

The old man grinned, and leaned his spear against the wall. ‘Always cold, down by the water.’ He came up, rubbing his hands together. ‘Just as well we got you to keep us warm, eh?’

‘Aye. Good luck all round.’ Dogman pulled out the stopper and let it dangle, lifted one of the mugs and poured out a slosh.

‘No need to be shy, eh, lad?’

‘I guess there ain’t at that.’ Dogman sloshed out some more. The man with one arm had to set his spear down when he got handed his mug. The boy came up last, and looked Dogman over, wary.

The old one nudged him with an elbow. ‘You sure your mother’d care for you drinking, boy?’

‘Who cares what she’d say?’ he growled, trying to make his high voice sound gruff.

Dogman handed him a mug. ‘You’re old enough to hold a spear, you’re old enough to hold a cup, I reckon.’

‘I’m old enough!’ he snapped, snatching it out o’ Dogman’s hand, but he shuddered when he drank from it. Dogman remembered his first drink, feeling mighty sick and wondering what all the fuss was about, and he smiled to himself. The boy thought he was being laughed at, most likely. ‘Who are you anyway?’

The old boy tutted. ‘Don’t mind him. He’s still young enough to think that rudeness wins respect.’

“S’ alright,” said Dogman, pouring himself a mug then setting the jar down on the stones, taking time to think out what to say, make sure he didn’t make no mistakes. ‘My name’s Cregg.’ He’d known a man called Cregg once, got killed in a scrap up in the hills. Dogman hadn’t liked him much, and he’d no idea why that name came to mind, but one was about as good as another right then, he reckoned. He slapped his thigh. ‘Got poked in the leg up at Dunbrec and it ain’t healed right. Can’t march no more. Reckon my days at holding a line are over, so my chief sent me down here, to watch the water with you lot.’ He looked out at the sea, flapping and sparkling under the moon like a thing alive. ‘Can’t say I’m too sorry about it, though. Being honest, I had a skin

full o' fighting.' That last bit was no lie, at least.

'Know how you feel,' said One-Arm, waving his stump in Dogman's face. 'How're things up there?'

'Alright. Union are still sat outside their own walls, trying everything to get in, and we're on the other side o' the river, waiting for 'em. Been that way for weeks.'

'I heard some boys have gone over to the Union. I heard old Threetrees was up there, got killed in that battle.'

'He was a great man, Rudd Threetrees,' said the old boy, 'great man.'

'Aye.' Dogman nodded. 'That he was.'

'Heard the Dogman took his place, though,' said One-Arm.

'That a fact?'

'So I heard. Mean bastard, that. Huge big lad. They call him Dogman 'cause he bit some woman's teats off one time.'

Dogman blinked. 'Do they now? Well, I never saw him.'

'I heard the Bloody-Nine was up there,' whispered the boy, eyes big like he was talking about a ghost.

The other two snorted at him. 'The Bloody-Nine's dead, boy, and good riddance to that evil fucker.' One-Arm shuddered. 'Damn it but you get some fool notions!'

'Just what I heard, is all.'

The old boy swilled down some more grog and smacked his lips. 'Don't much matter who's where. Union'll most likely get bored once they've got their fort back. Get bored and go home, across the sea, and everything back to normal. None of 'em will be coming down here to Uffrith, anyway.'

'No,' said One-Arm happily. 'They'll not be coming here.'

'Then why we out here watching for 'em?' whined the boy.

The old man rolled his eyes, like he'd heard it ten times before and always made the same answer. ' 'Cause that's the task we been given, lad.'

'And once you got a task, you best do it right.' Dogman remembered Logen telling him the same thing, and Threetrees too. Both gone now, and back in the mud, but it was still as true as it ever was. 'Even if it's a dull task, or a dangerous, or a dark one. Even if it's a task you'd rather not do.' Damn it, but he needed to piss. Always did, at a time like this.

'True enough,' said the old man, smiling down into his mug. 'Things've got to get done.'

'That they do. Shame, though. You seem a nice enough set o' lads.' And the Dogman reached behind his back, just like he was scratching his arse.

'Shame?' The boy looked puzzled. 'How d'you mean a—'

That was when Dow came up behind him and cut his neck open.

Same moment, almost, Grim's dirty hand clamped down on One-Arm's mouth and the bloody point of a blade slid out the gap in his cloak. Dogman jumped forward and gave the old man three quick stabs in the ribs. He wheezed, and stumbled, eyes wide, mug still hanging from his hand, groggy drool spilling out his open mouth. Then he fell down.

The boy crawled a little way. He had one hand to his neck, trying to keep the blood in, the other reaching out towards the pole the warning bell was hung on. He had some bones, the Dogman reckoned, to be thinking of the bell

with a slit throat, but he didn't drag himself more'n a stride before Dow stomped down hard on the back of his neck and squashed him flat.

Dogman winced as he heard the boy's neck bones crunch. He hadn't deserved to die like that, most likely. But that's what war is. A lot of folk getting killed that don't deserve it. The job had needed doing, and they'd done it, and were all three still alive. About as much as he could've hoped for from a piece of work like that, but somehow it still left a sour taste on him. He'd never found it easy, but it was harder than ever, now he was chief. Strange, how it's that much easier to kill folk when you've got someone telling you to do it. Hard business, killing. Harder than you'd think.

Unless your name's Black Dow, of course. That bastard would kill a man as easy as he'd take a piss. That was what made him so damn good at it. Dogman watched him bend down, strip the cloak from One-Arm's limp body and pull it round his own shoulders, then roll the corpse off into the sea, careless as dumping rubbish.

'You got two arms,' said Grim, already with the old man's cloak on.

Dow looked down at himself. 'What're you saying exactly? I ain't cutting my arm off to make for a better disguise, y'idiot!'

'He means keep it out o' sight.' Dogman watched Dow wipe out a mug with a dirty finger, pour himself a slug and knock it back. 'How can you drink at a time like this?' he asked, pulling the boy's bloody cloak off his corpse.

Dow shrugged as he poured himself another. 'Shame to waste it. And like you said. Cold night.' He broke a nasty grin. 'Damn it, but you can talk, Dogman. Name's Cregg.' He took a couple of limping steps. 'Stabbed in me arse up at Dunbrec! Where d'you get it from?' He slapped Grim's shoulder with the back of his hand. 'Fucking lovely, eh? They got a word for it, don't they? What's that word, now?'

'Plausible,' said Grim.

Dow's eyes lit up. 'Plausible. That's what y'are, Dogman. You're one plausible bastard. I swear, you could've told 'em you was Skarling Hoodless his own self and they'd have believed it. Don't know how you can keep a straight face!'

Dogman didn't feel too much like laughing. He didn't like looking at them two corpses, still laid out on the stones. Kept worrying that the boy'd get cold without his cloak. Damn fool thing to think about, given he was lying in a pool of his own blood a stride across.

'Never mind about that,' he grunted. 'Dump these two here and get over by the gate. Don't know when there'll be others coming.'

'Right y'are, chief, right y'are, whatever you say.' Dow heaved the two of them off into the water, then he unhooked the clapper from inside the bell and tossed that into the sea for good measure.

'Shame,' said Grim.

'What is?'

'Waste of a bell.'

Dow blinked at him. 'Waste of a bell, I swear! You got yourself a lot to say all of a sudden, and you know what? I think I liked you better before. Waste of a bell? You lost your mind, boy?'

Grim shrugged. 'Southerners might want one, when they get here.'

'They can fucking take a dive for the clapper then, can't they!' And Dow snatched up One-Arm's spear and strode over to the open gate, one hand stuffed inside his stolen cloak, grumbling to himself. 'Waste of a bell . . . by the fucking dead . . .'

The Dogman stretched up on his toes and unhooked the lamp, held it up, facing the sea, then he lifted one side of his cloak to cover it, brought it down again. Lifted it up, brought it down. One more time and he hooked it flickering back on the pole. Seemed a tiny little flame right then, to warm all their hopes at. A tiny little flame, to be seen all the way out there on the water, but the only one they had.

He was waiting all the time for the whole business to go wrong, for the clamour to go up in the town, for five dozen Carls to come pouring out that open gate and give the three o' them the killing they deserved. He was bursting to piss, thinking about it. But they didn't come. No sound but the empty bell creaking on its pole, the cold waves slapping on stone and wood. It was just the way they'd planned it.

The first boat came gliding out the darkness, Shivers grinning in the prow. A score of Carls were pressed into the boat behind him, working the oars real careful, white faces tensed up, teeth gritted with the effort of keeping quiet. Still, every click and clank of wood and metal set the Dogman's nerves to jumping.

Shivers and his boys hung some sacks of straw over the side as they brought the boat in close, stopping the wood scraping on the stones, all thought out the week before. They tossed up ropes and Dogman and Grim caught 'em, dragged the boat up tight and tied it off. Dogman looked over at Dow, leaning still and easy against the wall by the gate, and he shook his head gently, to say no one was moving in the town. Then Shivers was up the steps, smooth and quiet, squatting down in the darkness.

'Nice work, chief,' he whispered, smiling right across his face. 'Nice and neat.'

'There'll be time to slap each others' backs later. Get the rest o' them boats tied off.'

'Right y'are.' There were more boats coming now, more Carls, more sacks of straw. Shivers' boys pulled them in, started dragging men up onto the quay. All kinds of men who'd come over the last few weeks. Men who didn't care for Bethod's new way of doing things. Soon there was a good crowd of 'em down by the water. So many Dogman could hardly believe they weren't seen.

They formed up into groups, just the way they'd planned, each one with their own chief and their own task. A couple of the lads knew Uffrith and they'd made a plan of the place in the dirt, the way Threetrees used to. Dogman had every one of 'em learn it. He grinned when he thought of how much Black Dow had carped about that, but it was worth it now. He squatted by the gate, and they came past, one dark and silent group at a time.

Tul was first up, a dozen Carls behind him. 'Alright, Thunderhead,' said Dogman, 'you got the main gate.'

'Aye,' nodded Tul.

'Biggest task o' the lot, so try and get it done quiet.'

'Quiet, you got it.'

'Luck then, Tul.'

'Won't need it.' And the giant hurried off into the dark streets with his crew behind.

'Red Hat, you got the tower by the well and the walls beside.'

'That I have.'

'Shivers, you and your boys are keeping a watch on the town square.'

'Like the owl watches, chief.'

And so on, past they went, through the gate and into the dark streets, making no more noise than the wind off the sea and the waves on the dock, Dogman giving each crew their task and slapping 'em off on their way. Black Dow came up last, and a hard-looking set of men he had behind him.

'Dow, you got the headman's hall. Stack it up with some wood, like we said, but don't set fire to it, you hear? Don't kill anyone you don't have to. Not yet.'

'Not yet, fair enough.'

'And Dow.' He turned back. 'Don't go bothering any womenfolk either.'

'What do you think I am?' he asked, teeth gleaming in the darkness, 'Some kind of an animal?'

And that was it done. There was just him and Grim, and a few others to watch the water. 'Uh,' said Grim, nodding his head slowly. That was high praise indeed from him.

Dogman pointed over at the pole. 'Get us that bell, would you?' he said. 'Might have a use for it after all.'

By the dead, but it made a sound. Dogman had to half close his eyes, his whole arm trembling as he whacked at the bell with the handle of his knife. He didn't feel too comfortable in amongst all those buildings, squashed in by walls and fences. He hadn't spent much time in towns in his life, and what he had spent he hadn't much enjoyed. Either burning things and causing mischief after a siege, or lying around in Bethod's prisons, waiting to be killed.

He blinked round at the jumble of slate roofs, the walls of old grey stone, black wood, dirty grey render, all greasy with the thin rain. Seemed a strange way to live, sleeping in a box, waking all your days in the exact same spot. The idea alone made him restless, as though that bell hadn't got him twitchy enough already. He cleared his throat and set it down on the cobbles beside him. Then he stood there waiting, one hand on the hilt of his sword in a way that he hoped meant business.

Some flapping footfalls came from down a street and a little girl ran out into the square. Her jaw dropped open when she saw them standing there, a dozen men all bearded and armed, Tul Duru in their midst. Probably she never saw a man half so big. She turned around sharp to run the other way, almost slipping over on the slick cobbles. Then she saw Dow sitting on a pile of wood just behind her, leaning back easy against the wall, his drawn sword on his knees, and she froze stone still.

'That's alright, girl,' growled Dow. 'You can stay where y'are.'

There were more of 'em coming now, hurrying down into the square from all around, all getting that same shocked look when they saw Dogman and his

lads stood waiting. Women and boys, mostly, and a couple of old men. Dragged out o' their beds by the bell and still half asleep, eyes red and faces puffy, clothes tangled, armed with whatever was to hand. A boy with a butcher's cleaver. An old man all stooped over with a sword looked even older than he was. A girl at the front with a pitch fork and a lot of messy dark hair, had a look on her face reminded Dogman of Shari. Hard and thoughtful, the way she used to look at him before they started lying together. Dogman frowned down at her dirty bare feet, hoping that he wouldn't have to kill her.

Getting 'em good and scared would be the best way to get things done quick and easy. So Dogman tried to talk like someone to be feared, rather than someone who was shitting himself. Like Logen might've talked. Or maybe that was more fear than was needful. Like Threetrees, then. Tough but fair, wanting what was best for everyone.

'The headman among you?' he growled.

'I'm him,' croaked the old man with the sword, his face all slack with shock at finding a score of well-armed strangers standing in the middle of his town square. 'Brass is my name. Who the hell might you be?'

'I'm the Dogman, and this here is Harding Grim, and the big lad is Tul Duru Thunderhead.' Some eyes went wide, some folk muttered to each other. Seemed they'd heard the names before. 'We're here with five hundred Carls and last night we took your city off you.' A few gasps and squeals at that. It was closer to two hundred, but there was no point telling 'em so. They might've got the notion that fighting was a good idea and he'd no wish to end up stabbing a woman, or getting stabbed by one either. 'There's plenty more of us, round about, and your guards are all trussed up, those we didn't have to kill. Some o' my boys, and you ought to know I'm talking of Black Dow—'

'That's me.' Dow flashed his nasty grin, and a few folk shuffled fearfully away from him like they'd been told hell itself was sat there.

'... Well, they were for putting the torch straight to your houses and getting some killing done. Do things like we used to with the Bloody-Nine in charge, you take my meaning?' Some child in amongst the rest started to cry a bit, a wet kind of snuffling. The boy stared round him, cleaver wobbling in his hand, the dark-haired girl blinked and clung on tighter to her pitch-fork. They got the gist, alright. 'But I thought I'd give you a fair chance to give up, being as the town's full with womenfolk and children and all the rest. My score's with Bethod, not with you people. The Union want to use this place as a port, bring in men and supplies and whatever. They'll be here inside an hour, in their ships. A lot of 'em. It's happening with or without your say so. I guess my point is we can do this the bloody way, if that's the way you want it. The dead know we've had the practice. Or you can give up your weapons, if you've got 'em, and we can all get along, nice and ... what's the word for it?'

'Civilised,' said Grim.

'Aye. Civilised. What d'you say?'

The old man fingered his sword, looking like he'd rather have leant on it than swung it, and he stared up at the walls, where a few of the Carls were looking down, and his shoulders slumped. 'Looks like you got us cold. The Dogman, eh? I always heard you was a clever bastard. No one much left here to fight you, anyway. Bethod took every man could hold a spear and a shield

at once.' He looked round at the sorry crowd behind him. 'Will you leave the women be?'

'We'll leave 'em be.'

'Those that want to be left be,' said Dow, leering at the girl with the pitchfork.

'We'll leave 'em be,' growled Dogman, giving him a hard look. 'I'll see to it.'

'Well then,' wheezed the old man, shuffling up and wincing as he knelt and dropped his rusty blade at Dogman's feet. 'You're a better man than Bethod, far as I'm concerned. I suppose I ought to be thanking you for your mercy, if you keep your word.'

'Uh.' Dogman didn't feel too merciful. He doubted the old boy he'd killed on the dock would be thanking him, or the one-armed man stabbed through from behind, or the lad with the cut throat who'd had his whole life stolen.

One by one the rest of the crowd came forward, and one by one the weapons, if you could call 'em that, got dropped in a heap. A pile of old rusty tools and junk. The boy came up last and let his cleaver clatter down with the rest, gave a scared look at Black Dow, then hurried back to the others and clung to the dark-haired girl's hand.

They stood there, in a wide-eyed huddle, and Dogman could almost smell their fear. They were waiting for Dow and his Carls to set to hacking 'em down where they stood. They were waiting to get herded in a house and locked in and the place set fire to. Dogman had seen all that before. So he didn't blame 'em one bit as they all crowded together like sheep pressed up in a field in winter. He'd have done the same.

'Alright!' he barked. 'That's it! Back to your houses, or whatever. Union'll be here before midday, and it'd be better if the streets were empty.'

They blinked at Dogman, and at Tul, and at Black Dow, and at each other. They swallowed and trembled, and muttered their thanks to the dead. They broke up, slowly, and spread out, and went off their own ways. Alive, to everyone's great relief.

'Nicely done, chief,' said Tul in Dogman's ear. 'Threetrees himself couldn't have done it no better.'

Dow sidled up from the other side. 'About the women, though, if you're asking my opinion—'

'I'm not,' said Dogman.

'Have you seen my son?' There was one woman who wasn't going home. She was coming up from one man to another, half-tears in her eyes and her face all wild from worry. The Dogman put his head down and looked the other way. 'My son, he was on guard, down by the water! You seen him?' She tugged at Dogman's coat, her voice cracked and wet-sounding. 'Please, where's my son?'

'You think I know where everyone's at?' he snapped in her weepy face. He strode away like he had a load of important stuff to do, and all the while he was thinking – you're a coward, Dogman, you're a bastard bloody coward. Some hero, pulling a neat trick on a bunch of women, and children, and old men.

It ain't easy, being chief.

This Noble Business

The great moat had been drained early in the siege, leaving behind a wide ditch full of black mud. At the far end of the bridge across it four soldiers worked by a cart, dragging corpses to the bank and rolling them flopping down to the bottom. The corpses of the last defenders, gashed and burned, splattered with blood and dirt. Wild men, from past the River Crinna far to the east, tangle-haired and bearded. Their limp bodies seemed pitifully withered after three months sealed up behind the walls of Dunbrec, pitifully starved. Scarcely human. It was hard for West to take much joy in the victory over such sorry creatures as these.

‘Seems a shame,’ muttered Jalenhorm, ‘after they fought so bravely. To end like that.’

West watched another ragged corpse slither down the bank and into the tangled heap of muddy limbs. ‘This is how most sieges end. Especially for the brave. They’ll be buried down there in the muck, then the moat will be flooded again. The waters of the Whiteflow will surge over them, and their bravery, or lack of it, will have meant nothing.’

The fortress of Dunbrec loomed over the two officers as they crossed the bridge, black outlines of walls and towers like great, stark holes in the heavy white sky. A few ragged birds circled above. A couple more croaked from the scarred battlements.

It had taken General Kroy’s men a month to make this same journey, bloodily repulsed time and again, and to finally break through the heavy doors under a steady rain of arrows, stones, and boiling water. Another week of claustrophobic slaughter to force the dozen strides down the tunnel beyond, to burst through the second gate with axe and fire and finally seize control of the outer wall. Every advantage had lain with the defenders. The place had been most carefully designed to ensure that it was so.

And once they had made it through the gatehouse, their problems were only just beginning. The inner wall was twice the height and thickness of the outer, dominating its walkways at every point. There had been no shelter from missiles from the six monstrous towers.

To conquer that second wall Kroy’s men had tried every strategy in the manual of siege. They had worked with pick and crowbar, but the masonry was five strides thick at the base. They had made an effort at a mine but the ground was waterlogged outside the fortress and solid Angland rock beneath. They had bombarded the place with catapults, but scarcely scratched the mighty bastions. They had come with scaling ladders, again and again, in waves and in parties, by surprise at night or brazenly in the day, and in the darkness and the light the straggling lines of Union wounded had shuffled away from their failed attempts, the dead dragged solemnly behind. They had finally tried reasoning with the wild defenders, through the medium of a

Northern translator, and the unfortunate man had been pelted with night soil.

It had been pure fortune, in the end. After studying the movements of the guards, one enterprising sergeant had tried his luck with a grapple under cover of night. He had climbed up and a dozen other brave men had followed him. They took the defenders by surprise, killed several of them and seized the gatehouse. The whole effort took ten minutes and cost one Union life. It was a fitting irony, to West's mind, that having tried every roundabout method and been bloodily repulsed, the Union army had finally entered the inner fortress by its open front gate.

A soldier was bent over near that archway now, being noisily sick onto the stained flagstones. West passed him with some foreboding, the sound of his clicking boot heels echoing around the long tunnel, and emerged into the wide courtyard at the centre of the fortress. It was a regular hexagon, echoing the shape of the inner and outer walls, all part of the perfectly symmetrical design. West doubted that the architects would have approved, however, of the state in which the Northmen had left the place.

A long wooden building at one side of the yard, perhaps a stables, had caught fire in the attack and was now reduced to a mass of charred beams, the embers still glowing. Those clearing away the mess had too much work outside the walls, and the ground was still scattered with fallen weapons and tangled corpses. The Union dead had been stretched out in rows near one corner and covered up with blankets. The Northmen lay in every attitude, on their faces or on their backs, curled up or stretched out where they fell. Beneath the bodies the stone flags were deeply scored, and not just with the random damage of a three-month siege. A great circle had been chiselled from the rock, and other circles within it, strange marks and symbols laid out in an intricate design. West did not care for its look in the least. Worse still, he was becoming aware of a repulsive stench to the place, more pungent even than the tang of burned wood.

'What ever is that smell?' muttered Jalenhorm, putting one hand over his mouth.

A sergeant nearby overheard him. 'Seems that our Northern friends chose to decorate the place.' He pointed up above their heads, and West followed the gauntleted finger with his eyes.

They were so decayed that it took him a moment to realise he was looking at the remains of men. They had been nailed, spread-eagled, to the inside walls of each of the towers, high above the lean-to buildings round the courtyard. Rotting offal hung down from their bellies, crawling with flies. Cut with the Bloody Cross, as the Northmen would say. Tattered shreds of brightly-coloured Union uniforms were still vaguely visible, fluttering in the breeze among the masses of putrefying flesh.

Clearly they had been hanging there some time. Since before the siege began, certainly. Perhaps since the fortress first fell to the Northmen. Corpses of the original defenders, nailed there, rotting, for all those months. Three appeared to be without their heads. The companion pieces, perhaps, to those three gifts that had been sent to Marshal Burr all that time ago. West found himself wondering, pointlessly, whether any of them had been alive when they were nailed up. Spit rushed into his mouth, the sound of flies buzzing

seeming suddenly, sickeningly loud.

Jalenhorm had gone pale as a ghost. He did not say anything. He did not have to. 'What happened here?' muttered West through his gritted teeth, as much to himself as anything.

'Well, sir, we think they were hoping to get help.' The sergeant grinned at him, clearly possessed of a very strong stomach. 'Help from some unfriendly gods, we've been guessing. Seems that no one was listening down below though, eh?'

West frowned at the ragged markings on the ground. 'Get rid of them! Tear up the flags and replace them if you have to.' His eyes strayed to the decaying cadavers above, and he felt his stomach give a painful squeeze. 'And offer a ten-mark bounty to the man with guts enough to climb up there and cut those corpses down.'

'Ten marks, sir? Bring me over that ladder!'

West turned and strode out through the open gates of the fortress of Dunbrec, holding his breath and hoping like hell that he never had occasion to visit the place again. He knew that he would be back, though. If only in his dreams.

Briefings with Poulder and Kroy were more than enough to sicken the healthiest of men, and Lord Marshal Burr was by no means in that category. The commander of His Majesty's armies in Angland was as pitifully shrunk as the defenders of Dunbrec had been, his simple uniform hanging loose around him while his pale skin seemed stretched too tight over the bones. In a dozen short weeks he had aged as many years. His hand shook, his lip trembled, he could not stand for long, and could not ride at all. From time to time he would grimace and shiver as though he was racked by unseen pangs. West hardly knew how he was able to carry on, but carry on he did, fourteen hours a day and more. He attended to his duties with all his old diligence. Only now they seemed to eat him up, piece by piece.

Burr frowned grimly up at the great map of the border region, his hands resting on his belly. The Whiteflow was a winding blue line down the middle, Dunbrec a black hexagon marked in swirly script. On its left, the Union. On its right, the North. 'So,' he croaked, then coughed and cleared his throat, 'The fortress is back in our hands.'

General Kroy gave a stiff nod. 'It is.'

'Finally,' observed Poulder under his breath. The two generals still appeared to regard Bethod and his Northmen as a minor distraction from the real enemy; each other.

Kroy bristled, his staff muttering around him like a flock of angry crows. 'Dunbrec was designed by the Union's foremost military architects, and no expense was spared in its construction! Capturing it has been no mean task!'

'Of course, of course,' growled Burr, doing his best to mount a diversion. 'Damned difficult place to take. Do we have any notion of how the Northmen managed it?'

'None survived to tell us what trickery they employed, sir. They fought,

without exception, to the death. The last few barricaded themselves in the stables and set fire to the structure.'

Burr glanced at West, and slowly shook his head. 'How can one understand such an enemy? What is the condition of the fortress now?'

'The moat was drained, the outer gatehouse partly destroyed, considerable damage done to the inner wall. The defenders tore down some buildings for wood to burn and stones to throw and left the rest in . . .' Kroy worked his lips as though struggling to find the words. 'A very poor condition. Repairs will take some weeks.'

'Huh.' Burr rubbed unhappily at his stomach. 'The Closed Council are anxious that we cross the Whiteflow into the North as soon as possible, and take the fight to the enemy. Positive news for the restless populace, and so on.'

'The capture of Uffrith,' leaped in Poulder, with a grin of towering smugness, 'has left our position far stronger. We have gained at a stroke one of the best ports in the North, perfectly situated to supply our forces as we push into enemy territory. Before, everything had to come the length of Angland by cart, over bad roads in bad weather. Now we can bring in supplies and reinforcements by ship and almost straight to the front! And the whole thing managed without a single casualty!'

West was not about to allow him to steal the credit for that. 'Absolutely,' he droned in an emotionless monotone. 'Our northern allies have once again proved invaluable.'

Poulder's red-jacketed staff frowned and grumbled. 'They played a part,' the General was forced to admit.

'Their leader, the Dogman, came to us with the original plan, executed it himself using his own men, and delivered the town to you, its gates open and its people compliant. That was my understanding.'

Poulder frowned angrily across at Kroy, who was now allowing himself the very thinnest of smiles. 'My men are in possession of the city and are already building up a stockpile of supplies! We have outflanked the enemy and forced him to fall back towards Carleon! That, Colonel West, is surely the issue here, and not precisely who did what!'

'Indeed!' cut in Burr, waving one big hand. 'You have both done great services for your country. But we must now look forward to future successes. General Kroy, arrange for work parties to be left behind to complete the repairs to Dunbrec, and a regiment of levies to man the defences. With a commander that knows his business, please. It would be embarrassing, to say the least, if we were to lose the fortress for a second time.'

'There will be no mistake,' snarled Kroy at Poulder, 'you can depend on it.'

'The rest of the army can cross the Whiteflow and form up on the far bank. Then we can begin to press east and northward, towards Carleon, using the harbour at Uffrith to bring in our supplies. We have driven the enemy out of Angland. Now we must press forward and grind Bethod to his knees.' And the Marshal twisted a heavy fist into his palm by way of demonstration.

'My division will be across the river by tomorrow evening,' hissed Poulder at Kroy, 'and in good order!'

Burr grimaced. 'We must move carefully, whatever the Closed Council say. The last time a Union army crossed the Whiteflow was when King Casamir

invaded the North. I need hardly remind you that he was forced to withdraw in some disarray. Bethod has caught us out before, and will only grow stronger as he falls back into his own territory. We must work together. This is not a competition, gentlemen.'

The two generals immediately competed with each other to be the one to agree most. West gave a long sigh, and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

The New Man

‘And so we return.’ Bayaz frowned towards the city: a bright, white crescent spread out around the glittering bay. Slowly but decisively it came closer, reaching out and wrapping Jezal in its welcoming embrace. The features grew distinct, green parks peeping out between the houses, white spires thrusting up from the mass of buildings. He could see the towering walls of the Agriont, sunlight glinting from burnished domes above. The House of the Maker loomed high over all, but even that forbidding mass now seemed, somehow, to speak of warmth and safety.

He was home. He had survived. It felt like a hundred years since he had stood at the stern of a not dissimilar ship, miserable and forlorn, watching Adua slide sadly away into the distance. Over the surging water, the snapping sailcloth, the cries of the seabirds, he began to distinguish the distant rumble of the city. It sounded like the most wonderful music he had ever heard. He closed his eyes and dragged the air in hard through his nostrils. The rotten salt tang of the bay was sweet as honey on his tongue.

‘One takes it you enjoyed the trip, then, Captain?’ asked Bayaz, with heavy irony.

Jezal could only grin. ‘I’m enjoying the end of it.’

‘No need to be downhearted,’ offered Brother Longfoot. ‘Sometimes a difficult journey does not deliver its full benefit until long after one returns. The trials are brief, but the wisdom gained lasts a lifetime!’

‘Huh.’ The First of the Magi curled his lip. ‘Travel brings wisdom only to the wise. It renders the ignorant more ignorant than ever. Master Ninefingers! Are you determined to return to the North?’

Logen took a brief break from frowning at the water. ‘I’ve got no reason to stay.’ He glanced sideways at Ferro, and she glared back.

‘Why look at me?’

Logen shook his head. ‘Do you know what? I’ve no fucking idea.’ If there had been anything vaguely resembling a romance between them, it appeared now to have collapsed irreparably into a sullen dislike.

‘Well,’ said Bayaz, raising his brows, ‘if you are decided.’ He held his hand out to the Northman and Jezal watched them shake. ‘Give Bethod a kick from me, once you have him under your boot.’

‘That I will, unless he gets me under his.’

‘Never easy, kicking upwards. My thanks for your help, and for your manners. Perhaps you will be my guest again, one day, at the library. We will look out at the lake, and laugh about our high adventures in the west of the World.’

‘I’ll hope for it.’ But Logen hardly looked as if there was much laughter in him, or much hope either. He looked like a man who had run out of choices.

In silence Jezal watched as the ropes were thrown down to the quay and

made fast, the long gangplank squealed out to the shore and scraped onto the stones. Bayaz called out to his apprentice. 'Master Quai! Time for us to disembark!' And the pale young man followed his master down from the ship without a backward glance, Brother Longfoot behind them.

'Good luck, then,' said Jezal, offering his hand to Logen.

'And to you.' The Northman grinned, ignored the hand and folded him in a tight and unpleasant-smelling embrace. They stayed there for a somewhat touching, somewhat embarrassing moment, then Ninefingers clapped him on the back and let him go.

'Perhaps I'll see you, up there in the North.' Jezal's voice was just the slightest bit cracked, in spite of all his efforts. 'If they send me . . .'

'Maybe, but . . . I think I'll hope not. Like I said, if I was you I'd find a good woman and leave the killing to those with less sense.'

'Like you?'

'Aye. Like me.' He looked over at Ferro. 'So that's it then, eh, Ferro?'

'Uh.' She shrugged her scrawny shoulders, and strode off down the gangplank.

Logen's face twitched at that. 'Right,' he muttered at her back. 'Nice knowing you.' He wagged the stump of his missing finger at Jezal. 'Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's got a touch with the women.'

'Mmm.'

'Aye.'

'Right.' Jezal was finding actually leaving strangely difficult. They had been almost constant companions for the last six months. To begin with he had felt nothing but contempt for the man, but now that it came to it, it was like leaving a much-respected older brother. Far worse, in fact, for Jezal had never thought too highly of his actual brothers. So he dithered on the deck, and Logen grinned at him as though he guessed just what he was thinking.

'Don't worry. I'll try to get along without you.'

Jezal managed half a smile. 'Just try to remember what I told you, if you get in another fight.'

'I'd say, unfortunately, that's pretty much a certainty.'

Then there was really nothing Jezal could do but turn away and clatter down to the shore, pretending that something had blown into his eye on the way. It seemed a long walk to the busy quay, to stand next to Bayaz and Quai, Longfoot and Ferro.

'Master Ninefingers can look after himself, I daresay,' said the First of the Magi.

'Oh, yes indeed,' chuckled Longfoot, 'few better!'

Jezal took a last look back over his shoulder as they headed off into the city. Logen raised one hand to him from the rail of the ship, and then the corner of a warehouse came between them, and he was gone. Ferro loitered for a moment, frowning back towards the sea, her fists clenched and a muscle working on the side of her head. Then she turned and saw Jezal watching her.

'What are you looking at?' And she pushed past him and followed the others, into the swarming streets of Adua.

The city was just as Jezal remembered it, and yet everything was different. The buildings seemed to have shrunk and huddled in meanly together. Even

the wide Middleway, the great central artery of the city, felt horribly squashed after the huge open spaces of the Old Empire, the awe-inspiring vistas of ruined Aulcus. The sky had been higher, out there on the great plain. Here everything was reduced, and, to make matters worse, had an unpleasant smell he had never before noticed. He went with his nose wrinkled, dodging between the buffeting flow of passers-by with bad grace.

It was the people that were strangest of all. It had been months since Jezal had seen more than ten at one time. Now there were suddenly thousands pressed in all around him, furiously intent on their own doings. Soft, and scrubbed, and decked out in gaudy colours, as freakish to him now as circus performers. Fashions had moved on while he was away facing death in the barren west of the World. Hats were worn at a different angle, sleeves had swollen to a wider cut, shirt collars had shrivelled to a length that would have been thought preposterously short a year before. Jezal snorted to himself. It seemed bizarre that such nonsense could ever have interested him, and he watched a group of perfumed dandies strutting past with the highest contempt.

Their group dwindled as they passed on through the city. First Longfoot made his effusive farewells with much pressing of hands, talk of honours and privileges, and promises of reunion that Jezal suspected, and indeed rather hoped, were insincere. Near the great market square of the Four Corners, Quai was dispatched on some errand or other with all his habitual sullen silence. That left only the First of the Magi as a companion, with Ferro slouching angrily along behind.

Being honest, Jezal would not have minded had the group dwindled considerably further. Ninefingers might have proved himself a staunch companion, but the rest of the dysfunctional family would hardly have been among Jezal's chosen dinner guests. He had long ago given up any hope that Ferro's armour of scowls would crack to reveal a caring soul within. But at least her abysmal temper was predictable. Bayaz, if anything, was an even more unnerving companion: one half grand-fatherly good humour, the other half who knew what? Whenever the old man opened his mouth Jezal flinched in anticipation of some ugly surprise.

But he chatted pleasantly enough for the time being. 'Might I ask what your plans are now, Captain Luthar?'

'Well, I suppose I will be sent to Angland, to fight against the Northmen.'

'I imagine so. Although we never know what turns fate may take.'

Jezal did not much care for the sound of that. 'And you? Will you be going back to . . .' He realised he had not the slightest idea of where the Magus had appeared from in the first place.

'Not quite yet. I will remain in Adua for the moment. Great things are afoot, my boy, great things. Perhaps I will stay to see how they turn out.'

'Move, bitch!' came a yell from the side of the road.

Three members of the city watch had gathered round a dirty-faced girl in a tattered dress. One was leaning down over her with a stick clenched in his fist, shouting in her face while she cringed back. An unhappy-seeming press had gathered to watch, workmen and labourers mostly, scarcely cleaner than the beggar herself.

'Why don't you let her be?' one grumbled.

One of the watchmen took a warning step at them, raising his stick, while his friend seized hold of the beggar by her shoulder, kicking over a cup in the road, sending a few coins tinkling into the gutter.

'That seems excessive,' said Jezal under his breath.

'Well.' Bayaz watched down his nose. 'These sort of things happen all the time. Are you telling me you've never seen a beggar moved along before?'

Jezal had, of course, often, and never raised an eyebrow. Beggars could not simply be left to clutter up the streets, after all. And yet for some reason the process was making him uncomfortable. The unfortunate waif kicked and cried, and the guardsman dragged her another stride on her back with entirely unnecessary violence, clearly enjoying himself. It was not so much the act itself that Jezal objected to, as that they would do it in front of him without a thought for his feelings. It rendered him somehow complicit.

'That is a disgrace,' he hissed through gritted teeth.

Bayaz shrugged. 'If it bothers you that much, why not do something about it?'

The watchman chose that moment to seize the girl by her scruffy hair and give her a sharp blow with his stick, and she squealed and fell, her arms over her head. Jezal felt his face twist. In a moment he had shoved through the crowd and dealt the man a resounding boot to his backside, sending him sprawling in the gutter. One of his companions came forward with his stick out, but stumbled back a moment later. Jezal realised he had his steels drawn, the polished blades glinting in the shadows beside the building.

The audience gasped and edged back. Jezal blinked. He had not intended the business to go anything like this far. Damn Bayaz and his idiotic advice. But there was nothing for it now but to carry it through. He assumed his most fearless and arrogant expression.

'One step further and I'll stick you like the swine you are.' He looked from one of the watchmen to the other. 'Well? Do any of you care to test me?' He earnestly hoped that none of them did, but he need not have worried. They were predictably cowardly in the face of determined resistance, and loitered just out of range of his steels.

'No one deals with the watch like that. We'll find you, you can depend on—'

'Finding me will present no difficulty. My name is Captain Luthar, of the King's Own. I am resident in the Agriont. You cannot miss it. It is the fortress that dominates the city!' And he jabbed up the street with his long steel, making one of the watchmen stumble away in fear. 'I will receive you at your convenience and you can explain to my patron, Lord Marshal Varuz, your disgraceful behaviour towards this woman, a citizen of the Union guilty of no greater crime than being poor!'

A ludicrously overblown speech, of course. Jezal found himself almost flushing with embarrassment at that last part. He had always despised poor people, and he was far from sure his opinions had fundamentally changed, but he got carried away halfway through and had no choice but to finish with a flourish.

Still, his words had their effect on the city watch. The three men backed away, for some reason grinning as if the whole business had gone just as they

planned, leaving Jezal to the unwanted approval of the crowd.

'Well done, lad!'

'Good thing someone's got some guts.'

'What did he say his name was?'

'Captain Luthar!' roared Bayaz suddenly, causing Jezal to jerk round halfway through sheathing his steels. 'Captain Jezal dan Luthar, the winner of last year's Contest, just now returned from his adventures in the west! Luthar, the name!'

'Luthar, did he say?'

'The one who won the Contest?'

'That's him! I saw him beat Gorst!'

The whole crowd were staring, wide-eyed and respectful. One of them reached out, as though to touch the hem of his coat, and Jezal stumbled backwards, almost tripping over the beggar-girl who had been the cause of the whole fiasco.

'Thank you,' she gushed, in an ugly commoner's accent rendered still less appealing by her bloody mouth. 'Oh, thank you, sir.'

'It was nothing.' Jezal edged away, deeply uncomfortable. She was extremely dirty, at close quarters, and he had no wish to contract an illness. The attention of the group as a whole was, in fact, anything but pleasant. He continued to shuffle backwards while they watched him, all smiles and admiring mutterings.

Ferro was frowning at him as they moved away from the Four Corners. 'Is there something?' he snapped.

She shrugged. 'You're not as much of a coward as you were.'

'My thanks for that epic praise.' He rounded on Bayaz. 'What the hell was that?'

'That was you carrying out a charitable act, my boy, and I was proud to see it. It would seem my lessons have not been entirely wasted on you.'

'I meant,' growled Jezal, who felt himself to have gained less than nothing from Bayaz' constant lecturing, 'what were you about, proclaiming my name to all and sundry? The story will now spread all over town!'

'I had not considered that.' The Magus gave a faint smile. 'I simply felt that you deserved the credit for your noble actions. Helping those less fortunate, the aid of a lady in distress, protecting the weak and so forth. Admirable, truly.'

'But—' muttered Jezal, unsure whether he was being taken for a fool.

'Here our paths diverge, my young friend.'

'Oh. They do?'

'Where are you going?' snapped Ferro suspiciously.

'I have a few matters to attend to,' said the Magus, 'and you will be coming with me.'

'Why would I do that?' She appeared to be in a worse mood even than usual since they left the docks, which was no mean achievement.

Bayaz' eyes rolled to the sky. 'Because you lack the social graces necessary to function for longer than five minutes on your own in such a place as this. Why else? You will be going back to the Agriont, I assume?' he asked Jezal.

'Yes. Yes, of course.'

‘Well, then. I would like to thank you, Captain Luthar, for the part you played in that little adventure of ours.’

‘How dare you, you magical arsehole? The entire business was a colossal, painful, disfiguring waste of my time, and a failure to boot.’ But what Jezal really said was, ‘Of course, yes.’ He took the old man’s hand, preparing to give it a limp shake. ‘It has been an honour.’

Bayaz’ grip was shockingly firm. ‘That is good to hear.’ Jezal found himself drawn very close to the old man’s face, staring into his glittering green eyes at unnervingly close quarters. ‘We may have the need to collaborate again.’

Jezal blinked. Collaborate really was an ugly choice of word. ‘Well then . . . er . . . perhaps I will . . . see you later?’ Never would have been preferable, in his opinion.

But Bayaz only grinned as he let go of Jezal’s buzzing fingers. ‘Oh, I feel sure we shall meet again.’

The sun shone pleasantly through the branches of the aromatic cedar, casting a dappled shade on the ground beneath, just as it used to. A pleasant breeze fluttered through the courtyard and the birds twittered in the branches of the trees, just as they always had. The old buildings of the barracks had not changed, crowding in, coated with rustling ivy on all sides of the narrow courtyard. But there the similarity to Jezal’s happy memories ended. A dusting of moss had crept up the legs of the chairs, the surface of the table had acquired a thick crust of bird droppings, the grass had gone unclipped for weeks on end and seed-heads thrashed at Jezal’s calves as he wandered past.

The players themselves were long gone. He watched the shadows shifting on the grey wood, remembering the sound of their laughter, the taste of smoke and strong spirits, the feel of the cards in his hand. Here Jalenhorm had sat, playing at being tough and manly. Here Kaspas had laughed at jokes at his own expense. Here West had leaned back and shaken his head with resigned disapproval. Here Brint had shuffled nervously at his hand, hoping for big wins that never came.

And here had been Jezal’s place. He dragged the chair out from the clutching grass, sat down in it with one boot up on the table and rocked it onto its rear legs. It seemed hard to believe, now, that he had sat here, watching and scheming, thinking about how best to make his friends seem small. He told himself he would never have engaged in any such foolishness now. No more than a couple of hands, anyway.

If he had thought that a thorough wash, a careful shave, a plucking of bristles and a long-winded arranging of hair would make him feel at home, he was disappointed. The familiar routines left him feeling like a stranger in his own dusty rooms. It was hard to become excited over the shining of the boots and buttons, or the arrangement of the gold braid just so.

When he finally stood before the mirror, where long ago he had whiled away so many delightful hours, he found his reflection decidedly unnerving. A lean and weather-worn adventurer stared bright-eyed from the Visserine glass, his sandy beard doing little to disguise the ugly scar down his bent jaw. His

old uniforms were all unpleasantly tight, scratchily starched, chokingly constricted round the collar. He no longer felt like he belonged in them to any degree. He no longer felt like a soldier.

He scarcely even knew who he should report to, after all this time away. Every officer he was aware of, more or less, was with the army in England. He supposed he could have sought out Lord Marshal Varuz, had he really wanted to, but the fact was he had learned enough about danger now to not want to rush at it. He would do his duty, if he was asked. But it would have to find him first.

In the meantime, he had other business to attend to. The very thought made him terrified and thrilled at once, and he pushed a finger inside his collar and tugged at it in an effort to relieve the pressure in his throat. It did not work. Still, as Logen Ninefingers had been so very fond of saying: it was better to do it, than to live with the fear of it. He picked up his dress sword, but after a minute of staring at the absurd brass scrollwork on the hilt, he tossed it on the floor and kicked it under his bed. Look less than you are, Logen would have said. He retrieved his travel-worn long steel and slid it through the clasp on his belt, took a deep breath, and walked to the door.

There was nothing intimidating about the street. It was a quiet part of town, far off from chattering commerce and rumbling industry. In the next road a knife sharpener was throatily proclaiming his trade. Under the eaves of the modest houses a pigeon coo-cooed halfheartedly. Somewhere nearby the sound of clapping hooves and crackling carriage-wheels rose and faded. Otherwise all was quiet.

He had already walked past the house once in each direction, and dared not do so again for fear that Ardee would see him through a window, recognise him, and wonder what the hell he was up to. So he made circuits of the upper part of the street, practising what he would say when she appeared at the door.

'I am returned.' No, no, too high-blown. 'Hello, how are you?' No, too casual. 'It's me, Luthar.' Too stiff. 'Ardee . . . I've missed you.' Too needy. He saw a man frowning at him from an upstairs window, and he coughed and made off quickly towards the house, murmuring to himself over and over. 'Better to do it, better to do it, better to do it . . .'

His fist pounded against the wood. He stood and waited, heart thumping in his teeth. The latch clicked and Jezal put on his most ingratiating smile. The door opened and a short, round-faced and highly unattractive girl stared at him from the doorway. There could be no doubt, however things had changed, that she was not Ardee. 'Yes?'

'Er . . .' A servant. How could he have been such a fool as to think Ardee would open her own front door? She was a commoner, not a beggar. He cleared his throat. 'I am returned . . . I mean to say . . . does Ardee West live here?'

'She does.' The maid opened the door far enough for Jezal to step through into the dim hallway. 'Who shall I say is calling?'

‘Captain Luthar.’

Her head snapped round as though it had an invisible string attached to it and he had given it a sudden jerk. ‘Captain . . . Jezal dan Luthar?’

‘Yes,’ he muttered, mystified. Could Ardee have been discussing him with the help?

‘Oh . . . oh, if you wait . . .’ The maid pointed to a doorway and hurried off, eyes wide, quite as if the Emperor of Gurkhul had come calling.

The dim living room gave the impression of having been decorated by someone with too much money, too little taste, and not nearly enough space for their ambitions. There were several garishly upholstered chairs, an oversized and over-decorated cabinet, and a monumental canvas on one wall which, had it been any bigger, would have required the room to be knocked through into the neighbouring house. Two dusty shafts of light came in through the gaps in the curtains, gleaming on the highly polished, if slightly wonky, surface of an antique table. Each piece might have passed muster on its own, but crowded together the effect was quite suffocating. Still, Jezal told himself as he frowned round at it all, he had come for Ardee, not for her furniture.

It was ridiculous. His knees were weak, his mouth was dry, his head was spinning, and with every moment that passed it got worse. He had not felt this scared in Aulus, with a crowd of screaming Shanka bearing down on him. He took a nervous circuit of the room, fists clenching and unclenching. He peered out into the quiet street. He leaned over a chair to examine the massive painting. A muscular-seeming king lounged in an outsize crown while fur-trimmed lords bowed and scraped around his feet. Harod the Great, Jezal guessed, but the recognition brought him little joy. Bayaz’ favourite and most tiresome topic of conversation had been the achievements of that man. Harod the Great could be pickled in vinegar for all Jezal cared. Harod the Great could go—

‘Well, well, well . . .’

She stood in the doorway, bright light from the hall beyond glowing in her dark hair and down the edges of her white dress, her head on one side and the faintest ghost of a smile on her shadowy face. She seemed hardly to have changed. So often in life, moments that are long anticipated turn out to be profound disappointments. Seeing Ardee again, after all that time apart, was undoubtedly an exception. All his carefully prepared conversation evaporated in that one instant, leaving him as empty-headed as he had been when he first laid eyes on her.

‘You’re alive, then,’ she murmured.

‘Yes . . . er . . . just about.’ He managed half an awkward smile. ‘Did you think I was dead?’

‘I hoped you were.’ That wiped the grin off his face with sharp effect. ‘When I didn’t get so much as a letter. But really I thought you’d just forgotten about me.’

Jezal winced. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t write. Very sorry. I wanted to . . .’ She swung the door shut and leaned against it with her hands behind her, frowning at him all the while. ‘There wasn’t a day I didn’t want to. But I was called for, and never had the chance to tell anyone, not even my family. I was

. . . I was far away, in the west.'

'I know you were. The whole city is buzzing with it, and if I've heard, it must be common knowledge indeed.'

'You've heard?'

Ardee jerked her head towards the hall. 'I had it from the maid.'

'From the maid?' How the hell could anyone in Adua have heard anything about his misadventures, let alone Ardee West's maid? He was assailed with sudden unpleasing images. Crowds of servants giggling at the thought of him lying around crying over his broken face. Everyone who was anyone gossiping about what a fool he must have looked being fed with a spoon by a scarred brute of a Northman. He felt himself blushing to the tips of his ears. 'What did she say?'

'Oh, you know.' She wandered absently into the room. 'That you scaled the walls at the siege of Darmium, was it? Opened the gates to the Emperor's men and so on.'

'What?' He was even more baffled than before. 'Darmium? I mean to say . . . who told her . . .'

She came closer, and closer, and he grew more and more flustered until he stammered to a stop. Closer yet, and she was looking slightly upwards into his face with her lips parted. So close that he was sure she was going to take him in her arms and kiss him. So close that he leaned forward slightly in anticipation, half-closing his eyes, his lips tingling . . . Then she passed him, her hair nearly flicking in his face, and went on to the cabinet, opening it and taking out a decanter, leaving him behind, marooned on the carpet.

In gormless silence he watched her fill two glasses and offer one out, wine slopping and trickling stickily down the side. 'You've changed.' Jezal felt a sudden surge of shame and his hand jerked up to cover his scarred jaw on an instinct. 'I don't mean that. Not just that, anyway. Everything. You're different, somehow.'

'I . . .' The effect she had on him was, if anything, stronger now than it used to be. Then there had not been all the weight of expectation, all the long day-dreaming and anticipation out in the wilderness. 'I've missed you.' He said it without thinking, then found himself flushing and had to try and change the subject. 'Have you heard from your brother?'

'He's been writing every week.' She threw her head back and drained her glass, started to fill it again. 'Ever since I found out he was still alive, anyway.'

'What?'

'I thought he was dead, for a month or more. He only just escaped from the battle.'

'There was a battle?' squeaked Jezal, just before remembering there was a war on. Of course there had been battles. He brought his voice back under control. 'What battle?'

'The one where Prince Ladisla was killed.'

'Ladisla's dead?' he squealed, voice shooting up into a girlish register again. The few times he had seen the Crown Prince the man had seemed so self-absorbed as to be indestructible. It was hard to believe he could simply be stabbed with a sword, or shot with an arrow, and die, like anyone else, but there it was.

'And then his brother was murdered—'

'Raynault? Murdered?'

'In his bed in the palace. When the king dies, they'll choose a new one by a vote in Open Council.'

'A vote?' His voice rose so high at that he almost felt some sick at the back of his throat.

She was already filling her glass again. 'Uthman's emissary was hanged for the murder, despite most likely being innocent, and so the war with the Gurkish is dragging on—'

'We're at war with the Gurkish as well?'

'Dagoska fell at the start of the year.'

'Dagoska . . . fell?' Jezal emptied his glass in one long swallow and stared at the carpet, trying to fit it all into his head. He should not have been surprised, of course, that things had moved on while he was away, but he had hardly expected the world to turn upside down. War with the Gurkish, battles in the North, votes to choose a new king?

'You need another?' asked Ardee, tilting the decanter in her hand.

'I think I'd better.' Great events, of course, just as Bayaz had said. He watched her pour, frowning down intently, almost angrily, as the wine gurgled out. He saw a little scar on her top lip that he had never noticed before, and he felt a sudden compulsion to touch it, and push his fingers in her hair, and hold her against him. Great events, but it all seemed of small importance compared to what happened now, in this room. Who knew? The course of his life might turn on the next few moments, if he could find the right words, and make himself say them.

'I really did miss you,' he managed. A miserable effort which she dismissed with a bitter snort.

'Don't be a fool.'

He caught her hand, making her look him in the eye. 'I've been a fool all my life. Not now. There were times, out there on the plain, the only thing that kept me alive was the thought that . . . that I might be with you again. Every day I wanted to see you . . .' She did nothing but frown back at him, entirely unmoved. Her failure to melt into his arms was highly frustrating, after all he had been through. 'Ardee, please, I didn't come here to argue.'

She scowled at the floor as she threw down another glass. 'I don't know why you did come here.'

'Because I love you, and I want never to be separated from you again! Please, tell me that you will be my wife!' He almost said it, but at the last moment he saw her scornful sneer, and he stopped himself. He had entirely forgotten how difficult she could be. 'I came here to say that I'm sorry. I let you down, I know. I came as soon as I could, but I see that you're not in the mood. I'll come back later.'

He brushed past her and made for the door but Ardee got there first, twisted the key in the lock and snatched it out. 'You leave me all alone here, without so much as a letter, then when you come back you want to leave without even a kiss?' She took a lurching step at him and Jezal found himself backing off.

'Ardee, you're drunk.'

She flicked her head with annoyance. 'I'm always drunk. Didn't you say you

missed me?’

‘But,’ he muttered, starting for some reason to feel slightly scared, ‘I thought —’

‘There’s your problem, you see? Thinking. You’re no good at it.’ She herded him back against the edge of the table, and he got his sword so badly tangled up with his legs he had to put a hand down to stop himself falling.

‘Haven’t I been waiting?’ she whispered, and her breath on his face was hot and sour-sweet with wine. ‘Just like you asked me?’ Her mouth brushed gently against his, and the tip of her tongue slipped out and lapped against his lips, and she made soft gurgling sounds in her throat and pressed herself up against him. He felt her hand slide down onto his groin, rubbing at him gently through his trousers.

The feeling was pleasant, of course, and caused an instant stiffening. Pleasant in the extreme, but more than slightly worrying. He looked nervously towards the door. ‘What about the servants?’ he croaked.

‘If they don’t like it they can find another fucking job, can’t they? They weren’t my idea.’

‘Then whose—ah!’

She twisted her fingers in his hair and dragged his head painfully round so she was speaking right into his face. ‘Forget about them! You came here for me, didn’t you?’

‘Yes . . . yes, of course!’

‘Say it, then!’ Her hand pressed up hard against his trousers, almost painful, but not quite.

‘Ah . . . I came for you.’

‘Well? Here I am.’ And her fingers fumbled with his belt and dragged it open. ‘No need to be shy now.’

He tried to catch her wrist. ‘Ardee, wait—’ Her other hand caught him a stinging slap right across the face and knocked his head sideways, hard enough to make his ears ring.

‘I’ve been sitting here for six months doing nothing!’ she hissed in his face, words slightly slurred. ‘Do you know how bored I’ve been? And now you’re telling me to wait? Fuck yourself!’ She dug roughly into his trousers and dragged his prick out, rubbing at him with one hand, squeezing at his face with the other while he closed his eyes and gasped shallow breaths into her mouth, nothing in his mind but her fingers.

Her teeth nipped at his lip, almost painful, and then harder. ‘Ah,’ he grunted. ‘Ah!’ She was decidedly biting him. Biting with a will, as though his lip were a piece of gristle to be chewed through. He tried to pull away but the table was at his back and she had him fast. The pain was almost as great as the shock, and then, as the biting went on, considerably greater.

‘Aargh!’ He grabbed hold of her wrist with one hand and twisted it behind her back, yanked her arm and shoved her down onto the table. He heard her gasp as her face cracked hard against the polished wood.

He stood over her, frozen with dismay, his mouth salty with blood. He could see one dark eye through Ardee’s tangled hair, expressionless, watching him over her twisted shoulder. The hair moved round her mouth as she breathed, fast. He let go of her wrist, suddenly, saw her arm move, the marks left by his

fingers angry pink on her skin. Her hand slid down and took hold of a fistful of her dress and pulled it up, took another fistful and pulled it up, until her skirts were all tangled around her waist and her bare, pale arse was slicking up at him.

Well. He might have been a new man, but he was still a man.

With each thrust her head tapped against the plaster, and his skin slapped against the backs of her thighs, and his trousers sagged further and further down his legs until his sword-hilt was scraping against the carpet. With each thrust the table made an outraged creaking, louder and louder every time, as though they were fucking over the back of some disapproving old man. With each thrust she made a grunt, and he made a gasp, not of pleasure or pain in particular, but a necessary moving of air in response to vigorous exercise. It was all over with merciful swiftness.

So often in life, moments that are long anticipated prove to be a profound disappointment. This was undoubtedly one of those occasions. When he had spent all those interminable hours out on the plain, saddle-sore and in fear of his life, dreaming of seeing Ardee again, a quick and violent coupling on the table in her tasteless living-room had not been quite what he'd had in mind. When they were done he pushed his wilting prick back inside his trousers, guilty, and ashamed, and miserable in the extreme. The sound of his belt-buckle clinking made him want to smash his face against the wall.

She got up, and let her skirts drop, and smoothed them down, her face to the floor. He reached for her shoulder. 'Ardee—' She shook him angrily off, and walked away. She tossed something on the floor behind her and it rattled on the carpet. The key to the door.

'You can go.'

'I can what?'

'Go! You got what you wanted, didn't you?'

He licked disbelieving at his bloody lip. 'You think this is what I wanted?' Nothing but silence. 'I love you.'

She gave a kind of cough, as if she was about to be sick, and she slowly shook her head. 'Why?'

He wasn't sure he knew. He wasn't sure what he meant, or how he felt any more. He wanted to start again, but he didn't know how. The whole thing was an inexplicable nightmare from which he hoped soon to wake. 'What do you mean, why?'

She bent over, fists clenched, and screamed at him. 'I'm fucking nothing! Everyone who knows me hates me! My own father hated me! My own brother!' Her voice cracked, and her face screwed up, and her mouth spat with anger and misery. 'Everything I touch I ruin! I'm nothing but shit! Why can't you see it?' And she put her hands over her face, and turned her back on him, and her shoulders shook.

He blinked at her, his own lip trembling. The old Jezal dan Luthar would most likely have made a quick grab for that key, sprinted from the room and off down the street, never to come back, and counted himself lucky to have got away so easily. The new one thought about it. He thought about it hard. But he had more character than that. Or so he told himself.

'I love you.' The words tasted like lies in his bloody mouth, but he had gone

far too far now to turn back. 'I still love you.' He crossed the room, and though she tried to push him off he put his arms around her. 'Nothing's changed.' He pushed his fingers into her hair, and held her head against his chest while she cried softly, sobbing snot down the front of his garish uniform. 'Nothing's changed,' he whispered. But of course it had.

Feeding Time

They did not sit so close that it was obvious they were together. *Two men who, in the course of their daily business, happen to have placed their arses on the same piece of wood.* It was early morning, and although the sun cast a stinging glare in Glokta's eyes and lent the dewy grass, the rustling trees, the shifting water in the park a golden glow, there was still a treacherous nip to the air. Lord Wetterlant was evidently an early riser. *But then so am I. Nothing encourages a man to leave his bed like being kept awake all night by searing cramps.*

His Lordship reached into a paper bag, drew out a pinch of bread dust between thumb and forefinger, and tossed it at his feet. A mob of self-important ducks had already gathered, and now they fussed at each other furiously in their efforts to get at the crumbs while the old nobleman watched them, his lined face a slack and emotionless mask.

'I am under no illusions, Superior,' he droned, almost without moving his lips and without looking up at all. 'I am not a big enough man to compete in this contest, even should I wish to. But I am big enough to get something from it. I intend to get what I can.' *Straight to business, then, for once. No need to talk about the weather, or how the children are, or the relative merits of different-coloured ducks.*

'There is no shame in that.'

'I do not think so. I have a family to feed, and it grows by the year. I strongly advise against too many children.' *Hah, That shouldn't be a problem.* 'And then I keep dogs, and they must be fed also, and have great appetites.' Wetterlant gave a long, wheezing sigh, and tossed the birds another pinch of bread. 'The higher you rise, Superior, the more dependents cry at you for scraps; that is a sad fact.'

'You carry a large responsibility, my Lord.' Glokta grimaced at a spasm in his leg, and cautiously stretched it out until he felt his knee click. 'How large, might I ask?'

'I have my own vote, of course, and control the votes of three other chairs on the Open Council. Families tied to my own by bonds of land, of friendship, of marriage, and of long tradition.' *Such bonds may prove insubstantial in times such as these.*

'You are certain of those three?'

Wetterlant turned his cold eyes on Glokta. 'I am no fool, Superior. I keep my dogs well chained. I am certain of them. As certain as we can be of anything, in these uncertain times.' He tossed more crumbs into the grass and the ducks quacked, and pecked, and beat at each other with their wings.

'Four votes in total, then.' *No mean share of the great pie.*

'Four votes in total.'

Glokta cleared his throat, checked quickly that there was no one within earshot. A girl with a tragic face stared listlessly into the water just down the

path. Two dishevelled officers of the King's Own sat on a bench as far away on the other side, holding forth to each other loudly about who had been drunker the night before. Might the tragic girl be listening for Lord Brock? *Might the two officers report to High Justice Marovia? I see agents everywhere, and it is just as well. There are agents everywhere.* He lowered his voice to a whisper. 'His Eminence would be willing to offer fifteen thousand marks for each vote.'

'I see.' Wetterlant's hooded eyes did not so much as twitch. 'So little meat would scarcely satisfy my dogs. It would leave nothing for my own table. I should tell you that Lord Barezin, in a highly roundabout manner, already offered me eighteen thousand a vote, as well as an excellent stretch of land that borders my own estates. Deer hunting woods. Are you a hunting man, Superior?'

'I was.' Glokta tapped his ruined leg. 'But not for some time.'

'Ah. My commiserations. I have always loved the sport. But then Lord Brock came to visit me.' *How charming for you both.* 'He was good enough to make an offer of twenty thousand, and a very suitable match of his youngest daughter for my eldest son.'

'You accepted?'

'I told him it was too early to accept anything.'

'I am sure his Eminence could stretch to twenty-one, but that would have to be—'

'High Justice Marovia's man already offered me twenty-five.'

'Harlen Morrow?' hissed Glokta through his remaining teeth.

Lord Wetterlant raised an eyebrow. 'I believe that was the name.'

'I regret that I can only match that offer at present. I will inform his Eminence of your position.' *His delight, I am sure, will know no bounds.*

'I look forward to hearing from you, Superior.' Wetterlant turned back to his ducks and permitted them a few more crumbs, a vague smile hovering round his lips as he watched them tussle with each other.

Glokta hobbled painfully up to the ordinary house in the unexceptional street, something resembling a smile on his face. *A moment free of the suffocating company of the great and the good. A moment in which I do not have to lie, or cheat, or watch for a knife in my back. Perhaps I'll even find a room that doesn't still stink of Harlen Morrow. That would be a refreshing—*

The door opened sharply even as he raised his fist to knock, and he was left staring into the grinning face of a man wearing the uniform of an officer in the King's Own. It was so unexpected that Glokta did not recognise him at first. Then he felt a surge of dismay.

'Why, Captain Luthar. What a surprise.' *And a thoroughly unpleasant one.*

He was considerably changed. Where once he had been boyish and smooth, he had acquired a somewhat angular, even a weather-beaten look. Where once he had carried his chin with an arrogant lift, he now had an almost apologetic tilt to his face. He had grown a beard too, perhaps in an unsuccessful attempt to disguise a vicious-looking scar *through his lip and down his jaw. Though it has far from rendered him ugly, alas.*

'Inquisitor Glokta . . . er . . .'

'Superior.'

'Really?' Luthar blinked at him for a moment. 'Well . . . in that case . . .' The easy smile reappeared, and Glokta was surprised to find himself being shaken warmly by the hand. 'Congratulations. I would love to chat but duty calls. I haven't long in the city, you see. Off to the North, and so on.'

'Of course.' Glokta frowned after him as he stepped jauntily off up the street, with just the one furtive glance over his shoulder as he rounded the corner. *Leaving only the question of why he was here in the first place.* Glokta hobbled through the open door and shut it quietly behind him. *Although honestly, a young man leaving a young woman's house in the early morning? One scarcely requires his Majesty's Inquisition to solve that particular mystery. Did I not leave more than my share of residences in the early hours, after all? Pretending to hope that I wasn't observed, but really rather hoping that I was? He passed through the doorway into the living room. Or was that a different man?*

Ardee West stood with her back to him, and he heard the sound of wine trickling into a glass. 'Did you forget something?' she asked over her shoulder, voice soft and playful. *Not a tone I often get to hear women use. Horror, disgust, and the slightest touch of pity are more common.* There was a clinking as she put the bottle away. 'Or did you decide you really couldn't live without another—' She had a crooked smile on her face as she turned, but it slid off suddenly when she saw who was standing there.

Glokta snorted. 'Don't worry, I get that reaction from everyone. Even myself, every morning, when I look into the mirror.' *If I can even manage to stand up in front of the damn thing.*

'It's not like that, and you know it. I just wasn't expecting you to wander in.'

'We've all had quite the shock this morning, then. You'll never guess who I passed in your hallway.'

She froze for just a moment, then tossed her head dismissively and slurped wine from her glass. 'Aren't you going to give me a clue?'

'Alright, I will.' Glokta winced as he lowered himself into a chair, stretching his aching leg out in front of him. 'A young officer in the King's Own, no doubt with a scintillating future ahead of him.' *Though we can all hope otherwise.*

Ardee glared at him over the rim. 'There are so many officers in the King's Own I can scarcely tell one from another.'

'Really? This one won last year's Contest, I believe.'

'I hardly remember who was in the final. Every year is like the last, don't you find?'

'True. Since I competed it's been straight downhill. But I thought you might remember this particular fellow. Looked as if someone might have hit him in the face since we last met. Quite hard, I would say.' *Though not half as hard as I'd have liked.*

'You're angry with me,' she said, but without the appearance of the slightest concern.

'I'd say disappointed. But what would you expect? I thought you were cleverer than this.'

'Cleverness is no guarantee of sensible behaviour. My father used to say so

all the time.' She finished her wine with a practised flick of her head. 'Don't worry. I can look after myself.'

'No you can't. You've made that abundantly clear. You realise what will happen if people find out? You'll be shunned.'

'What would be the difference?' she sneered at him. 'Perhaps you'll be surprised to learn I get few invitations to the palace now. I barely even qualify as an embarrassment. No one speaks to me.' *Apart from me, of course, but I'm hardly the type of company young women hope for.* 'No one cares a shit what I do. If they find out it will be no worse than they expect from a slattern like me. Damn commoners, no more self-control than animals, don't you know. Anyway, didn't you tell me I could fuck who I pleased?'

'I also told you the less fucking the better.'

'And I suppose that's what you told all your conquests, is it?'

Glokta grimaced. *Not exactly. I coaxed and I pleaded, I threatened and I bullied. Your beauty has wounded me, wounded me in the heart! I am wretched, I will die without you! Have you no pity? Do you not love me? I did everything short of display the instruments, then when I got what I wanted I tossed them aside and went merrily on to the next with never a backward glance.*

'Hah!' snorted Ardee, as though she guessed what he was thinking. 'Sand dan Glokta, giving lectures on the benefits of chastity? Please! How many women did you ruin before the Gurmish ruined you? You were notorious!'

A muscle began to tremble in his neck, and he worked his shoulder round until he felt it soften. *She makes a fair point. Perhaps a soft word with the gentleman in question will do the trick. A soft word, or a hard night with Practical Frost.* 'Your bed, your business, I suppose, as they say in Styria. How does the great Captain Luthar come to be among the civilians in any case? Doesn't he have Northmen to rout? Who will save Angland, while he's here?'

'He wasn't in Angland.'

'No?' *Father find him a nice, out of the way spot, did he?*

'He's been in the Old Empire, or some such. Across the sea to the west and far away.' She sighed as though she had heard a great deal about it and was now thoroughly bored of the subject.

'Old Empire? What the hell was he up to out there?'

'Why don't you ask him? Some journey. He talked a lot about a Northman. Ninefingers, or something.'

Glokta's head jerked up. 'Ninefingers?'

'Mmm. Him and some old bald man.'

A flurry of twitches ran down Glokta's face. 'Bayaz.' Ardee shrugged and swigged from her glass again, already developing a slight drunken clumsiness to her movements. *Bayaz. All we need, with an election coming, is that old liar sticking his hairless head in.* 'Is he here, now, in the city?'

'How should I know?' grumbled Ardee. 'Nobody tells me anything.'

So Much in Common

Ferro stalked round the room, and scowled. She poured her scorn out into the sweet-smelling air, onto the rustling hangings, over the great windows and the high balcony beyond them. She sneered at the dark pictures of fat pale kings, at the shining furniture scattered about the wide floor. She hated this place, with its soft beds and its soft people. She infinitely preferred the dust and thirst of the Badlands of Kanta. Life there was hard, and hot, and brief.

But at least it was honest.

This Union, and this city of Adua in particular, and this fortress of the Agriont especially, were all packed to bursting with lies. She felt them on her skin, like an oily stain she could not rub off. And Bayaz was sunk in the very midst of it. He had tricked her into following him across the world for nothing. They had found no ancient weapon to use against the Gurmish. Now he smiled, and laughed, and whispered secrets with old men. Men who came in sweating from the heat outside, and left sweating even more.

She would never have admitted it to anyone else. She despised having to admit it to herself. She missed Ninefingers. Though she had never been able to show it, it had been a reassurance, having someone she could halfway trust.

Now she had to look over her own shoulder.

All she had for company was the apprentice, and he was worse than nothing. He sat and watched her in silence, his book ignored on the table beside him. Watching and smiling without joy, as though he knew something she should have guessed. As though he thought her a fool for not seeing it. That only made her angrier than ever. So she prowled round the room, frowning at everything, her fists clenched and her jaw locked tight.

‘You should go back to the South, Ferro.’

She stopped in her tracks, and scowled at Quai. He was right, of course. Nothing would have pleased her more than to leave these Godless pinks behind forever and fight the Gurmish with weapons she understood. Tear vengeance from them with her teeth, if she had to. He was right, but that changed nothing. Ferro had never been much for taking advice. ‘What do you know about what I should do, scrawny pink fool?’

‘More than you think.’ He did not take his slow eyes away from her for a moment. ‘We are much alike, you and I. You may not see it, and yet we are. So much in common.’ Ferro frowned. She did not know what the sickly idiot meant by that, but she did not like the sound of it. ‘Bayaz will bring you nothing you need. He cannot be trusted. I found out too late, but you still have time. You should find another master.’

‘I have no master,’ she snapped at him. ‘I am free.’

One corner of Quai’s pale lips twitched up. ‘Neither of us will ever be free. Go. There is nothing for you here.’

‘Why do you stay, then?’

‘For vengeance.’

Ferro frowned deeper. ‘Vengeance for what?’

The apprentice leaned forward, his bright eyes fixed on hers. The door creaked open and he snapped his mouth shut, sat back and looked out of the window. Just as if he had never meant to speak.

Damn apprentice with his damn riddles. Ferro turned her scowl towards the door.

Bayaz came slowly through into the room, a teacup held carefully level in one hand. He did not so much as look in Ferro’s direction as he swept past and out the open door onto the balcony. Damn Magus. She stalked after, narrowing her eyes at the glare. They were high up, and the Agriont was spread out before them, as it had been when she and Ninefingers climbed over the rooftops, long ago. Groups of idle pinks lazed on the shining grass below, just as they had done before Ferro left for the Old Empire. And yet not everything was the same.

Everywhere in the city, now, there was a kind of fear. She could see it in each soft, pale face. In their every word and gesture. A breathless expectation, like the air before the storm breaks. Like a field of dry grass, ready to burst into flame at the slightest spark. She did not know what they were waiting for, and she did not care.

But she had heard a lot of talk about votes.

The First of the Magi watched her as she stepped through the door, the bright sun shining on the side of his bald head. ‘Tea, Ferro?’

Ferro hated tea, and Bayaz knew it. Tea was what the Gurkish drank when they had treachery in mind. She remembered the soldiers drinking it while she struggled in the dust. She remembered the slavers drinking it while they talked prices. She remembered Uthman drinking it while he chuckled at her rage and her helplessness. Now Bayaz drank it, little cup held daintily between his thick thumb and forefinger, and he smiled.

Ferro ground her teeth. ‘I am done here, pink. You promised me vengeance and have given me nothing. I am going back to the South.’

‘Indeed? We would be sorry to lose you. But Gurkhul and the Union are at war. There are no ships sailing to Kanta at present. There may not be for some time to come.’

‘Then how will I get there?’

‘You have made it abundantly clear that you are not my responsibility. I have put a roof over your head and you show scant gratitude. If you wish to leave, you can make your own arrangements. My brother Yulwei should return to us shortly. Perhaps he will be prepared to take you under his wing.’

‘Not good enough.’ Bayaz glared at her. A fearsome look, perhaps, but Ferro was not Longfoot, or Luthar, or Quai. She had no master, and would never have another. ‘Not good enough, I said!’

‘Why is it that you insist on testing the limits of my patience? It is not without an end, you know.’

‘Neither is mine.’

Bayaz snorted. ‘Yours scarcely even has a beginning, as Master Ninefingers could no doubt testify. I do declare, Ferro, you have all the charm of a goat, and a mean-tempered goat at that.’ He stuck his lips out, tipped up his cup

and sucked delicately from the rim. Only with a mighty effort was Ferro able to stop herself from slapping it out of his hand, and butting the bald bastard in the face into the bargain. 'But if fighting the Gurmish is still what you have in mind—'

'Always.'

'Then I am sure that I can still find a use for your talents. Something that does not require a sense of humour. My purposes with regard to the Gurmish are unchanged. The struggle must continue, albeit with other weapons.' His eyes slid sideways, towards the great tower that loomed up over the fortress.

Ferro knew little about beauty and cared still less, but that building was a beautiful thing to her mind. There was no softness, no indulgence in that mountain of naked stone. There was a brutal honesty in its shape. A merciless precision in its sharp, black angles. Something about it fascinated her.

'What is that place?' she asked.

Bayaz narrowed his eyes at her. 'The House of the Maker.'

'What is inside?'

'None of your business.'

Ferro almost spat with annoyance. 'You lived there. You served Kanedias. You helped the Maker with his works. You told us all this, out on the plains. So tell me, what is inside?'

'You have a sharp memory, Ferro, but you forget one thing. We did not find the Seed. I do not need you. I do not need, in particular, to answer your endless questions any longer. Imagine my dismay.' He sucked primly at his tea again, raising his brows and peering out at the lazy pinks in the park.

Ferro forced a smile onto her own face. Or as close as she could get to a smile. She bared her teeth, at least. She remembered well enough what the bitter old woman Cawneil had said, and how much it had annoyed him. She would do the same. 'The Maker. You tried to steal his secrets. You tried to steal his daughter. Tolomei was her name. Her father threw her from the roof. In return for her betrayal, in opening his gates to you. Am I wrong?'

Bayaz angrily flicked the last drops from his cup over the balcony. Ferro watched them glitter in the bright sun, tumbling downwards. 'Yes, Ferro, the Maker threw his daughter from the roof. It would seem that we are both unlucky in love, eh? Bad luck for us. Worse luck for our lovers. Who would have dreamed we have so much in common?' Ferro wondered about shoving the pink bastard off the balcony after his tea. But he still owed her, and she meant to collect. So she only scowled, and ducked back through the doorway.

There was a new arrival in the room. A man with curly hair and a wide smile. He had a tall staff in his hand, a case of weathered leather over one shoulder. There was something strange about his eyes – one light, one dark. There was something about his watchful gaze that made Ferro suspicious. Even more than usual.

'Ah, the famous Ferro Maljinn. Forgive my curiosity, but it is not every day that one encounters a person of your . . . remarkable ancestry.'

Ferro did not like that he knew her name, or her ancestry, or anything about her. 'Who are you?'

'Where are my manners? I am Yoru Sulfur, of the order of Magi,' and he offered his hand. She did not take it but he only smiled. 'Not one of the

original twelve, of course, not I. Merely an afterthought. A late addition. I was once apprentice to great Bayaz.'

Ferro snorted. That hardly qualified him for trust in her estimation. 'What happened?'

'I graduated.'

Bayaz tossed his cup down rattling on a table by the window. 'Yoru,' he said, and the newcomer humbly bowed his head. 'My thanks for your work thus far. Precise and to the point, as always.'

Sulfur's smile grew broader. 'A small cog in a large machine, Master Bayaz, but I try to be a sturdy one.'

'You have yet to let me down. I do not forget that. How is your next little game progressing?'

'Ready to begin, at your command.'

'Let us begin now. There is nothing to be gained by delay.'

'I shall make the preparations. I have also brought this, as you asked.' He swung the bag down from his shoulder and gingerly reached inside. He slowly drew out a book. Large and black, its heavy covers hacked, and scarred, and charred by fire. 'Glustrod's book,' he murmured softly, as though afraid to say the words.

Bayaz frowned. 'Keep it, for now. There was an unexpected complication.'

'A complication?' Sulfur slid the book back into its case with some relief.

'What we sought . . . was not there.'

'Then—'

'As regards our other plans, nothing is changed.'

'Of course.' Sulfur bowed his head again. 'Lord Isher will already be on his way.'

'Very well.' Bayaz glanced over at Ferro, as though he had only just remembered that she was there. 'For the time being, perhaps you would be good enough to give us the room? I have a visitor that I must attend to.'

She was happy to leave, but she took her time moving, if only because Bayaz wanted her gone quickly. She unfolded her arms, stood on the spot and stretched. She strolled to the door by a roundabout route, letting her feet scuff against the boards and fill the room with their ugly scraping. She stopped on the way to gaze at a picture, to poke at a chair, to flick at a shiny pot, none of which interested her at all. All the while Quai watched, and Bayaz frowned, and Sulfur grinned his knowing little grin. She stopped in the doorway.

'Now?'

'Yes, now,' snapped Bayaz.

She looked round the room one more time. 'Fucking Magi,' she snorted, and slid through the door.

She almost walked into a tall old pink in the room beyond. He wore a heavy robe, even in the heat, and had a sparkling chain around his shoulders. A big man loomed behind him, grim and watchful. A guard. Ferro did not like the old pink's look. He stared down his nose at her, chin tilted up, as though she were a dog.

As though she were a slave.

'Ssssss.' She hissed in his face as she shouldered past him. He gave an outraged snort and his guard gave Ferro a hard look. She ignored it. Hard

looks mean nothing. If he wanted her knee in his face he could try and touch her. But he did not. The two of them went in through the door.

‘Ah, Lord Isher!’ she heard Bayaz saying, just before it shut. ‘I am delighted that you could visit us at short notice.’

‘I came at once. My grandfather always said that—’

‘Your grandfather was a wise man, and a good friend. I would like to discuss with you, if I may, the situation in the Open Council. Will you take tea . . . ?’

Honesty

Jeza lay on his back, his hands behind his head, the sheets around his waist. He watched Ardee looking out of the window, her elbows on the sill, her chin on her hands. He watched Ardee, and he thanked the fates that some long-forgotten designer of military apparel had seen fit to provide the officers of the King's Own with a high-waisted jacket. He thanked them with a deep and earnest gratitude, because his jacket was all she was wearing.

It was amazing how things had changed between them, since that bitter, bewildering reunion. For a week they had not spent a night apart, and for a week the smile had barely left his face. Occasionally the memory would wallow up, of course, unbidden and horribly surprising, like a bloated corpse bobbing to the surface of the pond while one enjoys a picnic on the shore, of Ardee biting and hitting him, crying and screaming in his face. But when it did so he would fix his grin, and see her smile at him, and soon enough he would be able to shove those unpleasant thoughts back down again, at least for now. Then he would congratulate himself on being a big enough man to do it, and on giving her the benefit of the doubt.

'Ardee,' he wheedled at her.

'Mmm?'

'Come back to bed.'

'Why?'

'Because I love you.' Strange, how the more he said it, the easier it became.

She gave a bored sigh. 'So you keep saying.'

'It's true.'

She turned round, hands on the sill behind, her body a dark outline against the bright window. 'And what does that mean, exactly? That you've been fucking me for a week and you haven't had enough yet?'

'I don't think I'll ever get enough.'

'Well,' and she pushed herself away from the window and padded across the boards. 'I don't suppose there's any harm in finding out, is there? No more harm, anyway.' She stopped at the foot of the bed. 'Just promise me one thing.'

Jeza swallowed, worried at what she might ask him, worried at what he might say in reply. 'Anything,' he murmured, forcing himself to smile.

'Don't let me down.'

His smile grew easier. That was not so hard to say yes to. He was a changed man, after all. 'Of course, I promise.'

'Good.' She crept up on to the bed, on her hands and knees, eyes fixed on his face while he wriggled his toes in anticipation under the sheet. She knelt up, one leg on either side of him, and jerked the jacket smooth across her chest. 'Well then, Captain, do I pass muster?'

'I would say . . .' and he grabbed the front of the jacket and pulled her down

on top of him, slipped his hands inside it, 'that you are without a doubt . . .' and he slid his hand under her breast and rubbed at her nipple with his thumb, 'the finest-looking soldier in my company.'

She pressed her groin against his through the sheet, and worked her hips back and forward. 'Ah, the Captain is already at attention . . .'

'For you? Constantly . . .'

Her mouth licked and sucked at his, smearing spit on his face, and he pushed his hand between her legs and she rubbed herself against it for a while, his sticky fingers squelching in and out of her. She grunted and sighed in her throat, and he did the same. She reached down and dragged the sheet out of the way. He took hold of his prick and she wriggled her hips until they found the right spot and worked her way down onto him, her hair tickling at his face, her rasping breath tickling at his ear.

There were two heavy knocks at the door, and they both froze. Another two knocks. Ardee put her head up, pushing her hair out of her flushed face. 'What is it?' she called, voice thick and throaty.

'There's someone for the Captain.' The maid. 'Is he . . . is he still here?'

Ardee's eyes rolled down to Jezal's. 'I daresay I could get a message to him!' He bit on his lip to stifle a laugh, reached up and pinched at her nipple and she slapped his hand away. 'Who is it?'

'A Knight Herald!' Jezal felt his smile fading. Those bastards never seemed to bring good news, and always at the worst possible times. 'Lord Marshal Varuz needs to speak to the Captain urgently. They're all over town looking for him.' Jezal cursed under his breath. It seemed that the army had finally realised he was back.

'Tell him that when I see the Captain I will let him know!' shouted Ardee, and the sound of footsteps retreated down the corridor outside.

'Fuck!' Jezal hissed as soon as he was sure the maid was gone, not that she could have been in too much doubt about what had been going on for the past few days and nights. 'I'll have to go.'

'Now?'

'Now, curse them. If I don't they'll just keep looking, and the sooner I go, the sooner I can get back.'

She sighed and rolled over onto her back while he slithered off the bed and started hunting round the room for his scattered clothes. His shirt had a wine stain down the front, his trousers were creased and rumpled, but they would have to do. Cutting the perfect figure was no longer his one goal in life. He sat down on the bed to pull his boots on and he felt her kneel behind him, her hands sliding across his chest, her lips brushing at his ear as she whispered to him. 'So you'll be leaving me all alone again, will you? Heading off to Angland, to slaughter Northmen with my brother?'

Jezal leaned down with some difficulty and heaved one boot on. 'Perhaps. Perhaps not.' The idea of the soldiering life no longer inspired him. He had seen enough of violence, close up, to know it was extremely frightening and hurt like hell. Glory and fame seemed like meagre rewards for all the risks involved. 'I'm giving serious thought to the idea of resigning my commission.'

'You are? And doing what?'

'I'm not sure.' He turned his head and raised an eyebrow at her. 'Maybe I'll

find a good woman and settle down.'

'A good woman? Do you know any?'

'I was hoping you might have some suggestions.'

She pressed her lips together. 'Let me think. Does she have to be beautiful?'

'No, no, beautiful women are always so bloody demanding. Plain as ditchwater, please.'

'Clever?'

Jeza! snorted. 'Anything but that. I am notorious for my emptyheadedness. A clever woman would only make me look the dunce the whole time.' He dragged the other boot on, peeled her hands away and stood up. 'A wide-eyed and thoughtless calf would be ideal. Someone to endlessly agree with me.'

Ardee clapped her hands. 'Oh yes, I can see her on you now, trailing from your arm like an empty dress, a kind of echo at a higher pitch. Noble blood though, I imagine?'

'Of course, nothing but the best. One point on which I could never compromise. And fair hair, I have a weakness for it.'

'Oh, I entirely agree. Dark hair is so commonplace, so very much the colour of dirt, and filth, and muck.' She shuddered. 'I feel sullied just thinking of it.'

'Above all,' as he pushed his sword through the clasp on his belt, 'a calm and even temper. I have had my fill of surprises.'

'Naturally. Life is difficult enough without a woman making trouble. So terribly undignified.' She raised her eyebrows. 'I will think through my acquaintance.'

'Excellent. In the meantime, and although you wear it with far greater dash than I ever could, I will need my jacket.'

'Oh, yes, sir.' She pulled it off and flung it at him, then stretched out on the bed, stark naked, back arched, hands above her head, wriggling her hips slowly back and forth, one knee in the air, the other leg stretched out, big toe pointing at him. 'You aren't going to leave me alone for too long, though, are you?'

He watched her for a moment. 'Don't you dare move a fucking inch,' he croaked, then he pulled the jacket on, wedged his prick between his thighs and waddled out the door, bent over. He hoped it would go down before he had his briefing with the Lord Marshal, but he was not entirely sure it would.

Once again, Jeza! found himself in one of High Justice Marovia's cavernous chambers, standing all alone on the empty floor, facing the enormous, polished table while three old men regarded him grimly from the other side.

As the clerk shut the high doors with an echoing boom, he had a deeply worrying sense of having lived through this very experience before. The day he had been summoned from the boat for England, torn from his friends and his ambitions, to be sent on a madcap, doomed journey into the middle of nowhere. A journey that had cost him some of his looks and nearly his life. It was safe to say that he did not entirely relish being back here, and hoped most fervently for a better outcome.

From that point of view, the absence of the First of the Magi was something

of a tonic, even if the panel was otherwise far from comforting. Facing him were the hard old faces of Lord Marshal Varuz, High Justice Marovia, and Lord Chamberlain Hoff.

Varuz was busy waxing on about Jezal's fine achievements in the Old Empire. He had, evidently, heard a very different version of events from the one that Jezal himself remembered.

'... great adventures in the west, as I understand it, bringing honour to the Union on foreign fields. I was particularly impressed by the story of your charge across the bridge at Darmium. Did that really happen the way I have been told?'

'Across the bridge, sir, well, truthfully, er . . .' He should probably have asked the old fool what the hell he was talking about, but he was far too busy thinking of Ardee, stretched out naked. Shit on his country. Duty be damned. He could resign his commission now and be back in her bed before the hour was out. 'The thing is—'

'That was your favourite, was it?' asked Hoff, lowering his goblet. 'It was the one about the Emperor's daughter that most caught my fancy.' And he looked at Jezal with a twinkle in his eye that implied a story of a saucy tone.

'Honestly, your Grace, I've not the slightest idea how that rumour began. Nothing of the kind occurred, I assure you. The whole business appears somehow to have become greatly exaggerated—'

'Well, one glorious rumour is worth ten disappointing truths, would you not agree?'

Jezal blinked. 'Well, er, I suppose—'

'In any case,' cut in Varuz, 'the Closed Council have received excellent reports of your conduct while abroad.'

'They have?'

'Many and various reports, and all glowing.'

Jezal could not help grinning, though he had to wonder from whom such reports might have come. He could scarcely imagine Ferro Maljinn gushing about his fine qualities. 'Well, your lordships are very kind, but I must—'

'As a result of your dedication and courage in this difficult and vital task, I am delighted to announce that you have been elevated to the rank of Colonel, with immediate effect.'

Jezal's eyes opened up very wide. 'I have?'

'You have indeed, my boy, and no one could deserve it more.'

To rise two ranks in one afternoon was an unprecedented honour, especially when he had fought in no battle, carried out no recent deeds of valour, and made no ultimate sacrifices. Unless you counted leaving off the most recent bedding of his best friend's sister halfway. A sacrifice, no doubt, but scarcely the kind that usually earned the King's favour.

'I, er, I . . .' He could not escape a glow of satisfaction. A new uniform, and more braid, and so forth, and more people to tell what to do. Glory and fame were meagre rewards, perhaps, but he had taken the risks already, and now had only to say yes. Had he not suffered? Had he not earned it?

He did not have to think about it for so very long. He scarcely had to think about it at all. The idea of leaving the army and settling down receded rapidly into the far distance. 'I would be entirely honoured to accept this exceptional .

. . er . . . honour.'

'Then we are all equally delighted,' said Hoff sourly. 'Now to business. You are aware, Colonel Luthar, that there has been some trouble with the peasants of late?'

Surprisingly, no news had reached Ardee's bedroom. 'Nothing serious, surely, your Grace?'

'Not unless you call a full-blown revolt serious.'

'Revolt?' Jezal swallowed.

'This man, the Tanner,' spat the Lord Chamberlain. 'He has been touring the countryside for months, whipping up dissatisfaction, sowing the seeds of disobedience, inciting the peasantry to crimes against their masters, against their lords, against their king!'

'No one ever suspected it would reach the point of open rebellion.' Varuz worked his mouth angrily. 'But following a demonstration near Keln a group of peasants encouraged by this Tanner armed themselves and refused to disband. They won a victory over the local landowner, and the insurrection spread. Now we hear they crushed a significant force under Lord Finster yesterday, burned his manor house and hung three tax collectors. They are in the process of ravaging the countryside in the direction of Adua.'

'Ravaging?' murmured Jezal, glancing at the door. Ravaging really was a very ugly word.

'It is a most regrettable business,' bemoaned Marovia. 'Half of them are honest men, faithful to their king, pushed to this through the greed of their landlords.'

Varuz sneered his disgust. 'There can be no excuse for treason! The other half are thieves, and blackguards, and malcontents. They should be whipped to the gallows!'

'The Closed Council has made its decision,' cut in Hoff. 'This Tanner has declared his intention to present a list of demands to the King. To the King! New freedoms. New rights. Every man the equal of his brother and other such dangerous nonsense. Soon it will become known that they are on their way and there will be panic. Riots in support of the peasants, and riots against them. Things are balanced on a knife edge already. Two wars in progress and the king in fading health, with no heir?' Hoff bashed at the table with his fist, making Jezal jump. 'They must not be allowed to reach the city.'

Marshal Varuz clasped his hands before him. 'The two regiments of the King's Own that have remained in Midderland will be sent out to counter this threat. A list of concessions,' and he scowled as he said the word, 'has been prepared. If the peasants will accept negotiation, and return to their homes, their lives can be spared. If this Tanner will not see reason, then his so-called army must be destroyed. Scattered. Broken up.'

'Killed,' said Hoff, rubbing at a stain on the table with his heavy thumb. 'And the ringleaders delivered to his Majesty's Inquisition.'

'Regrettable,' murmured Jezal, without thinking, feeling a cold shiver at the very mention of that institution.

'Necessary,' said Marovia, sadly shaking his head.

'But hardly straightforward.' Varuz frowned at Jezal across the table. 'In each village, in each town, in every field and farm they have passed through

they have picked up more recruits. The country is alive with malcontents. Ill-disciplined, of course, and ill-equipped, but at our last estimate they numbered some forty thousand.'

'Forty . . . thousand?' Jezal shifted his weight nervously. He had supposed they were perhaps discussing a few hundred, and those without proper footwear. There was no danger here, of course, safe behind the walls of the Agriont, the walls of the city. But forty thousand was an awful lot of very angry men. Even if they were peasants.

'The King's Own are making their preparations: one regiment of horse and one of foot. All that is missing now is a commander for the expedition.'

'Huh,' grunted Jezal. He did not begrudge that unfortunate man his position, commanding a force outnumbered five to one against a bunch of savages buoyed up by righteousness and petty victories, drunk on hatred of noblemen and monarchy, thirsty for blood and loot . . .

Jezal's eyes went wider still. 'Me?'

'You.'

He fumbled for the words. 'I do not wish to seem . . . ungrateful, you understand, but, surely, I mean to say, there must be men better suited to the task. Lord Marshal, you yourself have—'

'This is a complicated time.' Hoff glared sternly at Jezal from beneath his bushy brows. 'A very complicated time. We need someone without . . . affiliations. We need someone with a clean slate. You fit the bill admirably.'

'But . . . negotiating with peasants, your Grace, your Worship, Lord Marshal, I have no understanding of the issues! I have no understanding of law!'

'We are not blind to your deficiencies,' said Hoff. 'That is why there will be a representative from the Closed Council with you. Someone who possesses unchallenged expertise in all those areas.'

A heavy hand slapped suddenly down on Jezal's shoulder. 'I told you it would be sooner rather than later, my boy!' Jezal slowly turned his head, a feeling of terrible dismay boiling up from his stomach, and there was the First of the Magi, grinning into his face from a distance of no more than a foot, very much present after all. It was no surprise, really, that the bald old meddler was involved in this. Strange and painful events seemed to follow in his wake like stray dogs barking behind the butcher's wagon.

'The peasants' army, if we can call it such, is camped within four days' slovenly march of the city, spread out across the country, seeking for forage.' Varuz craned forward, poking at the table with a finger. 'You will proceed immediately to intercept them. Our hopes hang on this, Colonel Luthar. Do you understand your orders?'

'Yes, sir,' he whispered, trying and utterly failing to sound enthusiastic.

'The two of us, back together?' Bayaz chuckled. 'They'd better run, eh, my boy?'

'Of course,' murmured Jezal, miserably. He had had his own chance to escape, his chance to start a new life, and he had given it up in return for an extra star or two on his jacket. Too late he realised his awful blunder. Bayaz' grip tightened round his shoulder, drew him to a fatherly distance, and did not feel like releasing him. There really was no way out.

Jezal stepped out of the door to his quarters in a great hurry, cursing as he dragged his box behind him. It really was an awful imposition that he had been obliged to carry his own luggage, but time was extremely pressing if he was to save the Union from the madness of its own people. He had given only the briefest consideration to the idea of sprinting for the docks and taking passage on the first ship to distant Suljuk, before angrily dismissing it. He had taken the promotion with his eyes open, and now he supposed he had no choice but to see it through. Better to do it, than to live with the fear of it, and so forth. He twisted his key in the lock, turned around, and recoiled with a girlish gasp of shock. There was someone in the shadows opposite his door, and the feeling of horror only worsened when he realised who it was.

The cripple Gloкта stood against the wall, leaning heavily on his cane and grinning his repulsive, toothless grin. 'A word, Colonel Luthar.'

'If you are referring to this business with the peasants, it is well in hand.' Jezal was unable to keep the sneer of disgust entirely off his face. 'You need not trouble yourself on that—'

'I am not referring to that business.'

'Then what?'

'Ardee West.'

The corridor seemed suddenly very empty, very quiet. The soldiers, the officers, the servants, all away in Angland. There were just the two of them, for all Jezal knew, in the entire barracks. 'I fail to see how that is any concern of—'

'Her brother, our mutual friend Collem West, you do remember him? Worried-looking fellow, losing his hair. Bit of a temper.' Jezal felt a guilty flush across his face. He remembered the man well enough, of course, and his temper in particular. 'He came to me shortly before departing for the war in Angland. He asked me to look to his sister's welfare while he was away, risking his life. I promised to do so.' Gloкта shuffled slightly closer and Jezal's flesh crept. 'A responsibility which, I assure you, I take as seriously as any task the Arch Lector might choose to give me.'

'I see,' croaked Jezal. That certainly explained the cripple's presence at her house the other day, which had, until then, been causing him some confusion. He felt no easier in his mind, however. Considerably less, in fact.

'I hardly think that Collem West would be best pleased with what has been transpiring these last few days, do you?'

Jezal shifted guiltily from one foot to the other. 'I admit that I have visited her—'

'Your visits,' whispered the cripple, 'are not good for that girl's reputation. We are left with three options. Firstly, and this is my personal favourite, you walk away, and you pretend you never met her, and you never see her again.'

'Unacceptable,' Jezal found himself saying, his voice surprisingly brash.

'Secondly, then, you marry the lady, and all's forgotten.'

A course that Jezal was considering, but he was damned if he'd be bullied into it by this twisted remnant of a man. 'And third?' he enquired, with what he felt was fitting contempt.

'Third?' A particularly disgusting flurry of twitches crawled up the side of

Glokta's wasted face. 'I don't think you want to know too much about number three. Let us only say that it will include a long night of passion with a furnace and a set of razors, and an even longer morning involving a sack, an anvil, and the bottom of the canal. You might find that one of the other two options suits you better.'

Before he knew what he was doing Jezal had taken a step forward, forcing Glokta to rock back, wincing, against the wall. 'I do not have to explain myself to you! My visits are between me and the lady in question, but for your information, I long ago resolved to marry her, and am merely waiting for the right moment!' Jezal stood there in the darkness, hardly able to believe what he had heard himself say. Damn his mouth, it still landed him in all manner of trouble.

Glokta's narrow left eye blinked. 'Ah, lucky her.'

Jezal found himself moving forward again, almost butting the cripple in the face and crushing him helpless against the wall. 'That's right! So you can shove your threats up your crippled arse!'

Even squashed against the wall, Glokta's surprise only lasted an instant. Then he leered his toothless grin, his eyelid fluttering and a long tear running down his gaunt cheek. 'Why, Colonel Luthar, it is difficult for me to concentrate with you so very close.' He stroked the front of Jezal's uniform with the back of his hand. 'Especially given your unexpected interest in my arse.' Jezal jerked back, mouth sour with disgust. 'It seems that Bayaz succeeded where Varuz failed, eh? He taught you where your spine is! My congratulations on your forthcoming wedding. But I think I'll keep my razors handy, just in case you don't follow through. I'm so glad we had this chance to talk.' And Glokta limped off towards the stairs, his cane tapping on the boards, his left boot scraping along behind.

'As am I!' shouted Jezal after him. But nothing could have been further from the truth.

Ghosts

Uffrith didn't look much like it used to. Of course, the last time Logen had seen the place had been years ago, at night, after the siege. Crowds of Bethod's Carls wandering the streets – shouting, and singing, and drinking. Looking for folk to rob and rape, setting fire to anything that would hold a flame. Logen remembered lying in that room after he'd beaten Threetrees, crying and gurgling at the pain all through him. He remembered scowling out the window and seeing the glow from the flames, listening to the screams over the town, wishing he was out there making mischief and wondering if he'd ever stand up again.

It was different now, with the Union in charge, but it wasn't so very much more organised. The grey harbour was choked with ships too big for the wharves. Soldiers swarmed through the narrow streets, dropping gear all over. Carts and mules and horses, all loaded down and piled up, tried to shove a way through the press. Wounded limped on crutches down towards the docks, or were carried on stretchers through the spotting drizzle, bloody bandages stared at wide-eyed by the fresh-faced lads going the other way. Here and there, looking greatly puzzled at this mighty flood of strange people sweeping through their town, some Northerner was standing in a doorway. Women mostly, and children, and old men.

Logen walked fast up the sloping streets, pushing through the crowds with his head down and his hood up. He kept his fists bunched at his sides, so no one would see the stump of his missing finger. He kept the sword that Bayaz had given him wrapped up in a blanket on his back, under his pack, where it wouldn't make anyone nervous. All the same, his shoulders prickled every step of the way. He was waiting to hear someone shout, 'It's the Bloody-Nine!' He was waiting for folk to start running, screaming, pelting him with rubbish, faces all stamped with horror.

But no one did. One more figure that didn't belong was nothing to look at in all that damp chaos, and if anyone might have known him here, they weren't looking for him. Most likely they'd all heard he went back to the mud, far away, and were good and glad about it too. Still, there was no point staying longer than he had to. He strode up to a Union officer who looked as if he might be in charge of something, pushed his hood back and tried to put a smile on his face.

He got a scornful look for his trouble. 'We've no work for you, if that's what you're looking for.'

'You don't have my kind of work.' Logen held out the letter that Bayaz had given him.

The man unfolded it and looked it over. He frowned and read it again. Then he looked doubtfully up at Logen, mouth working. 'Well then. I see.' He pointed towards a crowd of young men, standing nervous and uncertain a few

strides away, huddled miserably together as the rain started to thicken up. 'There's a convoy of reinforcements leaving for the front this afternoon. You can travel with us.'

'Fair enough.' They didn't look like they'd be much reinforcement, those scared-seeming lads, but that didn't matter to him. He didn't much care who he travelled with, as long as they were pointed at Bethod.

The trees clattered by on either side of the road – dim green and black, full of shadows. Full of surprises, maybe. It was a tough way to travel. Tough on the hands from clinging to the rail all the way, even tougher on the arse from bouncing and jolting on that hard seat. But they were getting there, gradually, and Logen reckoned that was the main thing.

There were more carts behind, spread out in a slow line along the road, loaded down with men, food, clothes, weapons, and all the stuff you need to make a war. Each one had a lamp lit, hanging up near the front, so there was a trail of bobbing lights in the dull dusk, down into the valley and up the far slope, marking out the path of the road they'd followed through the woods.

Logen turned and looked at the Union boys, gathered up in a clump near the front of the cart. Nine of them, all jolting and swaying about together with the jumping of the axles, and all keeping as well clear of him as they could.

'You seen scars like that on a man before?' one muttered, not guessing he could speak their tongue.

'Who is he anyway?'

'Dunno. A Northman, I guess.'

'I can see he's a Northman, idiot. I mean what's he doing here with us?'

'Maybe he's a scout.'

'Big bastard for a scout, ain't he?'

Logen grinned to himself as he watched the trees roll past. He felt the cool breeze on his face, smelled the mist, the earth, the cold, wet, air. He never would have thought he'd be happy to be back in the North, but he was. It was good, after all that time a stranger, to be in a place where he knew the rules.

They camped out on the road, the ten of them. One group out of many, strung out through the woods, each one clustered close to their cart. Nine lads on one side of a big fire, a pot of stew bubbling over the top of it and giving off a fine-smelling steam. Logen watched them stirring it, talking to each other about home, and what was coming, and how long they'd be out there.

After a while one of them started spooning the food out into bowls and handing them round. He looked over at Logen, once he was done with the rest, then served up one more. He edged over like he was coming at a wolf's cage.

'Er . . .' He held the bowl out at arm's length. 'Stew?' He opened his mouth up wide and pointed into it with his free hand.

'Thanks, friend,' said Logen as he took the bowl, 'but I know where to put it.'

The lads all stared at him, a row of worried-looking faces, lit up flickering yellow on the far side of the fire, more suspicious than ever at him speaking

their language. 'You talk common? You kept that quiet, didn't you?'

'Best to seem less than you are, in my experience.'

'If you say so,' said the lad who'd given him the bowl. 'What's your name, then?'

Logen wondered for a moment if he should make up a lie. Some nothing name that no one could have heard of. But he was who he was, and sooner or later someone would know him. That, and he'd never been much at lying. 'Logen Ninefingers, they call me.'

The lads looked blank. They'd never heard of him, and why would they have? A bunch of farmers' sons from far away, in the sunny Union. They looked like they barely knew their own names.

'What are you here for?' one of them asked him.

'Same as you. I'm here to kill.' The boys looked a bit nervy at that. 'Not you, don't worry. I've got some scores to settle.' He nodded off up the road. 'With Bethod.'

The lads exchanged some glances, then one of them shrugged. 'Well. Long as you're on our side, I guess.' He got up and dragged a bottle out of his pack. 'You want a drink?'

'Well, now.' Logen grinned and held out his cup. 'I've never yet said no to that.' He knocked it down in one, smacked his lips as he felt it warming his gullet. The lad poured him another. 'Thanks. Best not give me too much, though.'

'Why?' he asked. 'Will you kill us then?'

'Kill you? If you're lucky.'

'And if we're not?'

Logen grinned over his mug. 'I'll sing.'

The lad cracked a smile at that, and one of his mates started laughing. Next moment an arrow hissed into his side and he coughed blood down his shirt, the bottle dropping on the grass, wine gurgling out in the dark. Another boy had a shaft sticking in his thigh. He sat there, frozen, staring down at it. 'Where did that . . .' Then everyone was shouting, fumbling for weapons or throwing themselves flat on their faces. A couple more arrows whizzed over, one clattering into the fire and sending up a shower of sparks.

Logen threw his stew away, snatched up his sword and started running. He blundered into one of the boys on the way and knocked him on his face, slipped and slid, righted himself and ran full tilt for the trees where the arrow came from. It was run right at them, or run away, and he made the choice without thinking. Sometimes it doesn't matter too much what choice you make, as long as you make it quick and stick to it. Logen saw one of the archers as he rushed up close, a flash of his pale skin in the darkness as he reached for another arrow. He pulled the Maker's sword from its tattered sheath and let go a fighting roar.

The bowman could've got his arrow away before Logen was on him, most likely, but it would've been a close thing, and in the end he didn't have the bones to stand there waiting. Not many men can weigh their choices properly while death comes racing up at them. He dropped the bow too late and turned to run, and Logen hacked him in the back before he got more than a stride or two, knocked him screaming into the bushes. He dragged himself round face

up, all tangled in the brush, screeching and fumbling for a knife. Logen lifted the sword to finish the job. Then blood sprayed out of the archer's mouth and he trembled, fell back and was quiet.

'Still alive,' Logen mouthed to himself, squatting down low beside the corpse, straining into the darkness. It would probably have been better for all concerned if he'd run the other way, but it was a bit late for that. Probably have been better if he'd stayed in Adua, but it was a bit late for that too.

'Bloody North,' he cursed in a whisper. If he let these bastards go they'd be making mischief all the way to the front and Logen wouldn't get a wink of sleep for worrying, aside from the good chance of an arrow in his face. Better odds coming for them, than waiting for them to come to him. A lesson he'd learned from hard experience.

He could hear the rest of the ambush crashing away through the brush and he set out after them, fist clenched tight round the grip of his sword. He felt his way between the trunks, keeping his distance. The light of the fire and the noise of the Union boys shouting dwindled behind him until he was deep in the woods, smelling of pines and wet earth, only the sound of men's hurrying feet to guide him. He made himself part of the forest, the way he had in the old days. It wasn't so hard to do. The knack came right back as though he'd been creeping in the trees every night for years. Voices echoed through the night, and Logen pressed himself still and silent up behind a pine-trunk, listening.

'Where's Dirty-Nose?'

There was a pause. 'Dead, I reckon.'

'Dead? How?'

'They had someone with 'em, Crow. Some big fucker.' Crow. Logen knew the name. Knew the voice too, now that he heard it. A Named Man who'd fought for Littlebone. You couldn't have called them friends, him and Logen, but they'd known each other. They'd been close together in the line at Carleon, fighting side by side. And now here they were again with no more than a few strides between them, more than willing to kill each other. Strange, the turns fate can take. Fighting with a man and fighting against him are only a whisker apart. Far closer together than not fighting at all.

'Northman, was he?' came Crow's voice.

'Might've been. Whoever it was he knew his business. Came up real quick. I didn't have time to get a shaft away.'

'Bastard! We ain't letting that pass. We'll camp out here and follow 'em tomorrow. Might be we'll get him then, this big one.'

'Oh aye, we'll fucking get him. Don't you worry about that none. I'll cut his neck for him, the bastard.'

'Good for you. 'Til then you can keep an eye open for him while the rest of us catch some sleep. Might be the anger'll keep you awake this time, eh?'

'Aye, chief. Right y'are.'

Logen sat and watched, catching glimpses through the trees as four of them spread out their blankets and rolled up to sleep. The fifth took his place, back to the others, and looked out the way they'd come, sitting guard. Logen waited, and he heard one begin to snore. Some rain started up, and it tapped and trickled on the branches of the pines. After a while it splattered into his

hair, into his clothes, ran down his face and fell to the wet earth, drip, drip, drip. Logen sat, still and silent as a stone.

It can be a fearsome weapon, patience. One that few men ever learn to use. A hard thing, to keep your mind on killing once you're out of danger and your blood's cooled off. But Logen had always had the trick of it. So he sat and let the slow time sneak by, and thought about long ago, until the moon was high, and there was pale light washing down between the trees with the tickling rain. Pale light enough for him to see his tasks by.

He uncurled his legs and started moving, working his way between the tree trunks, planting his feet nice and gentle in the brush. The rain was his ally, patter and trickle masking the soft sounds his boots made as he circled round behind the guard.

He slid out a knife, wet blade glinting once in the patchy moonlight, and he padded out from the trees and through their camp. Between the sleeping men, close enough to touch them. Close as a brother. The guard sniffed and shifted unhappily, dragging his wet blanket round his shoulders, all beaded up with twinkling rain drops. Logen stopped and waited, looked down at the pale face of one of the sleepers, turned sideways, eyes closed and mouth wide open, breath making faint smoke in the clammy night.

The guard was still now, and Logen slipped up close behind him, holding his breath. He reached out with his left hand, fingers working in the misty air, feeling for the moment. He reached out with his right hand, fist clenched tight round the hard grip of his knife. He felt his lips curling back from his gritted teeth. Now was the time, and when the time comes, you strike with no backward glances.

Logen reached round and clamped his hand tight over the guard's mouth, cut his throat quick and hard, deep enough that he felt the blade scraping on his neck bones. He jerked and struggled for a moment, but Logen held him tight, tight as a lover, and he made no more than a quiet gurgle. Logen felt blood over his hands, hot and sticky. He didn't worry yet about the others. If one of them woke all they'd see would be the outline of one man in the darkness, and that was all they were expecting.

It wasn't long before the guard went limp, and Logen laid him down gently on his side, head flopping. Four shapes lay there under their wet blankets, helpless. Maybe there'd been a time when Logen would've had to work himself up to a job like this. When he'd have had to think about why it was the right thing to do. But if there had been, it was long gone. Up in the North, the time you spend thinking will be the time you get killed in. All they were now were four tasks to get done.

He crept up to the first, lifted his bloody knife, overhand, and stabbed him clean in the heart right through his coat, hand pressed over his mouth. He died quieter than he slept. Logen came up on the second one, ready to do the same. His boot clattered into something metal. Water flask, maybe. Whatever it was, it made quite the racket. The sleeping man's eyes worked open, he started to lift himself up. Logen rammed the knife in his gut and dragged at it, slitting his belly open. He made a kind of a wheeze, mouth and eyes wide, clutching at Logen's arm.

'Eh?' The third one sat straight up and staring. Logen tore his hand free and

heaved his sword out. 'Wha' the—' The man lifted his arm up, on an instinct, and the dull blade took his hand off at the wrist and chopped deep into his skull, sending black spots of blood showering into the wet air and knocking him down on his back.

But that gave the last of them time enough to roll out of his blanket and grab up an axe. Now he stood hunched over, hands spread out, fighting ready like a man who'd had plenty of practice at it. Crow. Logen could hear his breath hissing, see it smoking in the rain.

'You should've started wi' me!' he hissed.

Logen couldn't deny it. He'd been concentrating on getting them all killed, and hadn't paid much mind to the order. Still, it was a bit late to worry now. He shrugged. 'Start or finish, ain't too much difference.'

'We'll see.' Crow weighed his axe in the misty air, shifting around, looking for an opening. Logen stood still and caught his breath, the sword hanging down by his side, the grip cold and wet in his clenched fist. He'd never been much of a one for moving until it was time. 'Best tell me your name, while you still got breath in you. I like to know who I've killed.'

'You already know me, Crow.' Logen held his other hand up, and he let the fingers spread out, and the moonlight glinted black on his bloody hand, and on the bloody stump of his missing finger. 'We were side by side in the line at Carleon. Never thought you'd all forget me so soon. But things don't often turn out the way we expect, eh?'

He'd stopped moving now, had Crow. Logen couldn't see more than a gleam of his eyes in the dark, but he could tell the doubt and the fear in the way he stood. 'No,' he whispered, shaking his head in the darkness. 'Can't be! Ninefingers is dead!'

'That so?' Logen took a deep breath and pushed it out, slow, into the wet night. 'Reckon I must be his ghost.'

They'd dug some sort of a hole to squat in, the Union lads, sacks and boxes up on the sides as a rampart. Logen could see the odd face moving over the top, staring off into the trees, the dull light from the guttering fire glinting on an arrow head or a spear tip. Dug in, watching for another ambush. If they'd been nervy before, they were most likely shitting themselves now. Probably one of them would get scared and shoot him as soon as he made himself known. Damn Union bows had a trigger that went off at a touch, once they were drawn. Would have been just about his luck, to get killed over nothing in the middle of nowhere, and by his own side too, but he didn't have much of a choice. Not unless he wanted to walk up to the front.

So he cleared his throat and called out. 'Now no one shoot or anything!' A string went and a bolt thudded into a tree a couple of strides to his left. Logen hunched down against the wet earth. 'No one shoot, I said!'

'Who's out there?'

'It's me, Ninefingers!' Silence. 'The Northman who was on the cart!'

A long pause, and some whispering. 'Alright! But come out slow, and keep your hands where we can see them!'

'Fair enough!' He straightened up and crept out from the trees, hands held high. 'Just don't shoot me, eh? That's your end of the deal!'

He walked across the ground towards the fire, arms spread out, wincing at the thought of getting a bolt in his chest any minute. He recognised the faces of the lads from before, them and the officer who had charge of the supply column. A couple of them followed him with their bows as he stepped slowly over the makeshift parapet and down into the trench. It had been dug along in front of the fire, but not that well, and there was a big puddle in the bottom.

'Where the hell did you get to?' demanded the officer angrily.

'Tracking them that ambushed us tonight.'

'Did you catch 'em?' one of the boys asked.

'That I did.'

'And?'

'Dead.' Logen nodded at the puddle in the bottom of the hole. 'So you needn't sleep in the water tonight. Any of that stew left?'

'How many were there?' snapped the officer.

Logen poked around the embers of the fire, but the pot was empty. Just his luck, again. 'Five.'

'You, on your own, against five?'

'There were six to begin with, but I killed one at the start. He's in the trees over there somewhere.' Logen dug a heel of bread out of his pack and rubbed it round the inside of the pot, trying to get a bit of meat grease on there, at least. 'I waited until they were sleeping, so I only had to fight one of 'em, face to face. Always been lucky that way, I guess.' He didn't feel that lucky. Looking at his hand in the firelight, it was still stained with blood. Dark blood under his fingernails, dried into the lines in his palm. 'Always been lucky.'

The officer hardly looked convinced. 'How do we know that you aren't one of them? That you weren't spying on us? That they aren't waiting out there now, for you to give them a signal when we're vulnerable?'

'You've been vulnerable the whole way,' snorted Logen. 'But it's a fair question. I thought you might ask it.' He pulled the canvas bag out from his belt. 'That's why I brought you this.' The officer frowned as he reached out for it, shook it open, peered suspiciously inside. He swallowed. 'Like I said, there were five. So you got ten thumbs in there. That satisfy you?'

The officer looked more sick than satisfied, but he nodded, lips squeezed together, and held the bag back out to him at arm's length.

Logen shook his head. 'Keep it. It's a finger I'm missing. I got all the thumbs I need.'

The cart lurched to a stop. For the last mile or two they'd moved at a crawl. Now the road, if you could use the word about a sea of mud, was choked up with floundering men. They squelched their way from one near solid spot to another, flowing through the thin rain between the press of mired carts and unhappy horses, the stacks of crates and barrels, the ill-pitched tents. Logen watched a group of filth-caked lads straining at a wagon stuck up to its axles in the muck, without much success. It was like seeing an army sink slowly into

a bog. A vast shipwreck, on land.

Logen's travelling companions were down to seven now, hunched and gaunt, looking mighty tired from sleepless nights and bad weather on the trail. One dead, one sent back to Uffrith already with an arrow in his leg. Not the best start to their time in the North, but Logen doubted it would get any better from here on. He clambered down off the back of the cart, boots sinking into the well-rutted mud, arched his back and stretched his aching legs out, dragged his pack down.

'Luck, then,' he said to the lads. None of them spoke. They'd hardly said a word to him since the night of the ambush. Most likely that whole business with the thumbs had got them worried. But if that was the worst they saw while they were up here they'd have done alright, Logen reckoned. He shrugged and turned away, started floundering through the muck.

Just up ahead the officer from the supply column was being dealt a talking-to by a tall, grim-looking man in a red uniform, seemed like the closest thing they had in all this mess to someone in charge. It took Logen a minute to recognise him. They'd sat together at a feast, in very different surroundings, and they'd talked of war. He looked older, leaner, tougher, now. He had a hard frown on his face and a lot of hard grey in his wet hair, but he grinned when he saw Logen standing there, and walked up to him with his hand out.

'By the dead,' he said in good Northern, 'but fate can play some tricks. I know you.'

'Likewise.'

'Ninefingers, wasn't it?'

'That's right. And you're West. From England.'

'That I am. Sorry I can't give you a better welcome, but the army only got up here a day or two ago and, as you can see, things aren't quite in order yet. Not there, idiot!' he roared at a driver trying to get his cart between two others, the space between them nowhere near wide enough. 'Do you have such a thing as summer in this bloody country?'

'You're looking at it. Didn't you see winter?'

'Huh. You've a point there. What brings you up here, anyway?'

Logen handed West the letter. He hunched over to shield it from the rain and read it, frowning.

'Signed by Lord Chamberlain Hoff, eh?'

'That a good thing?'

West pursed his lips as he handed the letter back. 'I suppose that depends. It means you've got some powerful friends. Or some powerful enemies.'

'Bit of both, maybe.'

West grinned. 'I find they go together. You've come to fight?'

'That I have.'

'Good. We can always use a man with experience.' He watched the recruits clambering down off the carts and gave a long sigh. 'We've still got far too many here without. You should go up and join the rest of the Northmen.'

'You've got Northmen with you?'

'We have, and more coming over every day. Seems that a lot of them aren't too happy with the way their King has been leading them. About his deal with the Shanka in particular.'

'Deal? With the Shanka?' Logen frowned. He'd never have thought that even Bethod would stoop that low, but it was hardly the first time he'd been disappointed. 'He's got Flatheads fighting with him?'

'He certainly does. He's got Flatheads, and we've got Northmen. It's a strange world, alright.'

'That it surely is,' said Logen, shaking his head. 'How many do you have?'

'About three hundred, I'd say, at last count, though they don't take too well to being counted.'

'Reckon I'll make it three hundred and one, then, if you'll have me.'

'They're camped up there, on the left wing,' and he pointed towards the dark outline of trees against the evening sky.

'Right enough. Who's the chief?'

'Fellow called the Dogman.'

Logen stared at him for a long moment. 'Called the what?'

'Dogman. You know him?'

'You could say that,' whispered Logen, a smile spreading right across his face. 'You could say that.'

Dusk was pressing on fast and night was pressing in fast behind, and they'd just got the long fire burning as Logen walked up. He could see the shapes of the Carls taking their places down each side of it, heads and shoulders cut out black against the flames. He could hear their voices and their laughter, loud in the still evening now the rain had stopped.

It had been a long time since he heard a crowd of men all speaking Northern, and it sounded strange in his ears, even if it was his own tongue. It brought back some ugly memories. Crowds of men shouting at him, shouting for him. Crowds charging into battle, cheering their victories, mourning their dead. He could smell meat cooking from somewhere. A sweet, rich smell that tickled his nose and made his gut grumble.

There was a torch set up on a pole by the path, and a bored-looking lad stood underneath it with a spear, frowning at Logen as he walked up. Must've drawn the short straw, to be on guard while the others were eating, and he didn't look too happy about it.

'What d'you want?' he growled.

'You got the Dogman here?'

'Aye, what of it?'

'I'll need to speak to him.'

'Will you, now?'

Another man walked up, well past his prime, with a shock of grey hair and a leathery face. 'What we got here?'

'New recruit,' grumbled the lad. 'Wants to see the chief.'

The old man squinted at Logen, frowning. 'Do I know you, friend?'

Logen lifted up his face so the torchlight fell across it. Better to look a man in the eye, and let him see you, and show him you feel no fear. That was the way his father had taught him. 'I don't know. Do you?'

'Where did you come over from? Whitesides' crew, is it?'

'No. I been working alone.'

'Alone? Well, now. Seems like I recognise—' The old boy's eyes opened up wide, and his jaw sagged open, and his face went white as cut chalk. 'By all the fucking dead,' he whispered, taking a stumbling step back. 'It's the Bloody-Nine!'

Maybe Logen had been hoping no one would know him. That they'd all have forgotten. That they'd have new things to worry them, and he'd be just a man like any other. But now he saw that look on the old boy's face – that shitting-himself look, and it was clear enough how it would be. Just the way it used to be. And the worst of it was, now that Logen was recognised, and he saw that fear, and that horror, and that respect, he wasn't sure that he didn't like seeing it. He'd earned it, hadn't he? After all, facts are facts.

He was the Bloody-Nine.

The lad didn't quite get it yet. 'Having a joke on me are yer? You'll be telling me it's Bethod his self come over next, eh?' But no one laughed, and Logen lifted his hand up and stared through the gap where his middle finger used to be. The lad looked from that stump, to the trembling old man and back.

'Shit,' he croaked.

'Where's your chief, boy?' Logen's own voice scared him. Flat, and dead, and cold as the winter.

'He's . . . he's . . . ' The lad raised a quivering finger to point towards the fires.

'Well then. Guess I'll sniff him out myself.' The two of them edged out of Logen's way. He didn't exactly smile as he passed. More he drew his lips back to show them his teeth. There was a certain reputation to be lived up to, after all. 'No need to worry,' he hissed in their faces. 'I'm on your side, ain't I?'

No one said a word to him as he walked along behind the Carls, up towards the head of the fire. A couple of them glanced over their shoulders, but nothing more than any newcomer in a camp might get. They'd no idea who he was, yet, but they soon would have. That lad and that old man would be whispering, and the whispers would spread around the fire, as whispers do, and everyone would be watching him.

He started as a great shadow moved beside him, so big he'd taken it for a tree at first. A huge, big man, scratching at his beard, smiling at the fire. Tul Duru. There could be no mistaking the Thunderhead, even in the half-light. Not a man that size. Made Logen wonder afresh how the hell he'd beaten him in the first place.

He felt a strange urge, right then, just to put his head down and walk past, off into the night and never look back. Then he wouldn't have to be the Bloody-Nine again. It would just have been a fresh lad and an old man, swore they saw a ghost one night. He could've gone far away, and started new, and been whoever he wanted. But he'd tried that once already, and it had done him no good. The past was always right behind him, breathing on his neck. It was time to turn around and face it.

'Alright there, big lad.' Tul peered at him in the dusk, orange light and black shadow shifting across his big rock of a face, his big rug of a beard.

'Who . . . hold on . . . ' Logen swallowed. He'd no idea, now he thought

about it, what any of them might make of seeing him again. They'd been enemies long before they were friends, after all. Each one of them had fought him. Each one had been keen to kill him, and with good reasons too. Then he'd run off south and left them to the Shanka. What if all he got after a year or more apart was a cold look?

Then Tul grabbed hold of him and folded him in a crushing hug. 'You're alive!' He let go of him long enough to check he had the right man, then hugged him again.

'Aye, I'm alive,' wheezed Logen, just enough breath left in him to say it. Seemed he'd get one warm welcome, at least.

Tul was grinning all over his face. 'Come on.' And he beckoned Logen after. 'The lads are going to shit!'

He followed Tul, his heart beating in his mouth, up to the head of the fire, where the chief would sit with his closest Named Men. And there they were, sat around on the ground. Dogman was in the middle, muttering something quiet to Dow. Grim was on the other side, leaning on one elbow, fiddling with the flights on his arrows. It was just like nothing had changed.

'Got someone here to see you, Dogman,' said Tul, his voice squeaky from keeping the surprise in.

'Have you, now?' Dogman peered up at Logen, but he was hidden in the shadows behind Tul's great shoulder. 'Can't it wait 'til after we've eaten?'

'Do you know, I don't think it can.'

'Why? Who is it?'

'Who is it?' Tul grabbed Logen's shoulder and shoved him lurching out into the firelight. 'It's only Logen fucking Ninefingers!' Logen's boot slid in the mud and he nearly pitched on his arse, had to wave his arms around all over to keep his balance. The talk around the fire all sputtered out in a moment and every face was turned towards him. Two long, frozen rows of them, slack in the shifting light, no sound but the sighing wind and the crackling fire. The Dogman stared up at him as though he was seeing the dead walk, his mouth hanging wider and wider open with every passing moment.

'I thought you was all killed,' said Logen as he got his balance back. 'Guess there's such a thing as being too realistic.'

Dogman got to his feet, slowly. He held out his hand, and Logen took hold of it.

There was nothing to say. Not for men who'd been through as much as the two of them had together – fighting the Shanka, crossing the mountains, getting through the wars, and after. Years of it. Dogman pressed his hand and Logen slapped his other hand on top of it, and Dogman slapped his other hand on top of that. They grinned at each other, and nodded, and things were back the way they had been. Nothing needed saying.

'Grim. Good to see you.'

'Uh,' grunted Grim, handing him up a mug then looking back to his shafts, just as though Logen had gone for a piss a minute ago and come back a minute later like everyone had expected. Logen had to grin. He'd have hoped for nothing else.

'That Black Dow hiding down there?'

'I'd have hidden better if I knew you were coming.' Dow looked Logen up

and down with a grin not entirely welcoming. 'If it ain't Ninefingers his self. Thought you said he went over a cliff?' he barked at Dogman.

'That's what I saw.'

'Oh, I went over.' Logen remembered the wind in his mouth, the rock and the snow turning around him, the crash as the water crushed his breath out. 'I went on over and I washed up whole, more or less.' Dogman made room for him on the stretched-out hides by the fire, and he sat down, and the others sat near him.

Dow was shaking his head. 'You always was a lucky bastard when it came to staying alive. I should've known you'd turn up.'

'I thought the Flatheads had got you all sure,' said Logen. 'How d'you get out of there?'

'Threetrees got us out,' said Dogman.

Tul nodded. 'Led us out and over the mountains, and hunted through the North, and all the way down into Angland.'

'Squabbling all the way like a bunch of old women, no doubt?' Dogman grinned across at Dow. 'There was some moaning on the trail.'

'Where's Threetrees now, then?' Logen was looking forward to having a word with that old boy.

'Dead,' said Grim.

Logen winced. He'd guessed that might be the way, since Dogman was in charge. Tul nodded his big head. 'Died fighting. Leading a charge, into the Shanka. Died fighting that thing. That Feared.'

'Bastard fucking thing.' And Dow hawked some spit into the mud.

'What about Forley?'

'Dead n'all,' barked Dow. 'He went into Carleon, to warn Bethod that the Shanka were coming over the mountains. Calder had him killed, just for the sport of it. Bastard!' And he spat again. He'd always been a great one for spitting, had Dow.

'Dead.' Logen shook his head. Forley dead, and Threetrees dead, it was a damn shame. But it wasn't so long since he thought the whole lot of them were back in the mud, so four still going was quite the bonus, in a way. 'Well. Good men both. The best, and died well, by the sound of it. As well as men can, anyway.'

'Aye,' said Tul, lifting up a mug. 'As well as you can. Here's to the dead.'

They all drank in silence, and Logen smacked his lips at the taste of beer. Too long away. 'So, a year gone by,' grunted Dow. 'We done some killing, and we walked a damn long way, and we fought in a bastard of a battle. We lost two men and we got us a new chief. What the hell you been up to, Ninefingers?'

'Well . . . that there is some kind of a tale.' Logen wondered what kind, exactly, and found he wasn't sure. 'I thought the Shanka got you all, since life's taught me to expect the worst, so I went south, and I fell in with this wizard. I went a sort of journey with him, across the sea and far away, to find some kind of a thing, which when we got there . . . weren't there.' It all sounded more than a bit mad now he said it.

'What kind of a thing?' asked Tul, his face all screwed up with puzzlement.

'Do you know what?' Logen sucked at his teeth, tasting of drink. 'I can't say

that I really know.' They all looked at each other as if they never heard such a damn-fool story, and Logen had to admit they probably hadn't. 'Still, it hardly matters now. Turns out life ain't quite the bastard I took it for.' And he gave Tul a friendly clap on the back.

The Dogman puffed out his cheeks. 'Well, we're glad you're back, anyway. Guess you'll be taking your place again now, eh?'

'My place?'

'You'll be taking over, no? I mean to say, you were chief.'

'Used to be, maybe, but I've no plans to go back to it. Seems as if these lads are happy enough with things the way they are.'

'But you know a sight more than me about leading men—'

'I don't know that's a fact. Me being in charge never worked out too well for anyone, now did it? Not for us, not for those who fought with us, not for them we fought against.' Logen hunched his shoulders at the memories. 'I'll put my word in, if you want it, but I'd sooner follow you. I did my time, and it wasn't a good one.'

Dogman looked like he'd been hoping for a different outcome. 'Well . . . if you're sure . . .'

'I'm sure.' And Logen slapped him on the shoulder. 'Not easy, is it, being chief?'

'No,' grumbled Dogman. 'It bloody ain't.'

'Besides, I reckon a lot of these lads have been on the other side of an argument with me before, and they're not altogether pleased to see me.' Logen looked down the fire at the hard faces, heard the mutterings with his name in them, too quiet to tell the matter for sure, but he could guess that it wasn't complimentary.

'They'll be glad enough to have you alongside 'em when the fighting starts, don't worry about that.'

'Maybe.' Seemed an awful shame that he'd have to set to killing before folk would give him so much as a nod. Sharp looks came at him from out the dark, flicking away when he looked back. There was only one man, more or less, who met his eye. A big lad with long hair, halfway down the fire.

'Who's that?' asked Logen.

'Who's what?'

'That lad down there staring at me.'

'That there is Shivers.' Dogman sucked at his pointed teeth. 'He's got a lot of bones, Shivers. Fought with us a few times now, and he does it damn well. First of all I'll tell you he's a good man and we owe him. Then I ought to mention that he's Rattleneck's son.'

Logen felt a wave of sickness. 'He's what?'

'His other son.'

'The boy?'

'Long time ago now, all that. Boys grow up.'

A long time ago, maybe, but nothing was forgotten. Logen could see that straight away. Nothing was ever forgotten, up here in the North, and he should've known better than to think it might be. 'I should say something to him. If we have to fight together . . . I should say something.'

Dogman winced. 'Might be better that you don't. Some wounds are best not

picked at. Eat, and talk to him in the morning. Everything sounds fairer in the daylight. That or you can decide against it.'

'Uh,' grunted Grim.

Logen stood up. 'You're right, most likely, but it's better to do it—'

'Than to live with the fear of it.' Dogman nodded into the fire. 'You been missed, Logen, and that's a fact.'

'You too, Dogman. You too.'

He walked down through the darkness, smelly with smoke and meat and men, along behind the Carls sitting at the fire. He felt them hunching their shoulders, muttering as he passed. He knew what they were thinking. The Bloody-Nine, right behind me, and there's no worse man in the world to have your back to. He could see Shivers watching him all the way, one eye cold through his long hair, lips pressed together in a hard line. He had a knife out for eating, but just as good for stabbing a man. Logen watched the firelight gleaming on its edge as he squatted down beside him.

'So you're the Bloody-Nine.'

Logen grimaced. 'Aye. I reckon.'

Shivers nodded, still staring at him. 'This is what the Bloody-Nine looks like.'

'Hope you're not disappointed.'

'Oh no. Not me. Good to have a face on you, after all this time.'

Logen looked down at the ground, trying to think of some way to come at it. Some way to move his hands, or set his face, some words that might start to make the tiniest part of it right. 'Those were hard times, back then,' he ended up saying.

'Harder'n now?'

Logen chewed at his lip. 'Well, maybe not.'

'Times are always hard, I reckon,' said Shivers between gritted teeth. 'That ain't an excuse for doing a runny shit.'

'You're right. There ain't any excuses for what I did. I'm not proud of it. Don't know what else I can say, except I hope you can put it out of the way, and we can fight side by side.'

'I'll be honest with you,' said Shivers, and his voice was strangled-sounding, like he was trying not to shout, or trying not to cry, or both at once, maybe. 'It's a hard thing to just put behind me. You killed my brother, when you'd promised him mercy, and you cut his arms and legs off, and you nailed his head on Bethod's standard.' His knuckles were trembling white round the grip of his knife, and Logen saw that it was taking all he had not to stab him in the face, and he didn't blame him. He didn't blame him one bit. 'My father never was the same after that. He'd nothing in him any more. I spent a lot of years dreaming of killing you, Bloody-Nine.'

Logen nodded, slowly. 'Well. You'll never be alone with that dream.' He caught other cold looks from across the flames, now. Frowns in the shadows, grim faces in the flickering light. Men he didn't even know, afraid to their bones, or nursing scores against him. A whole lot of fear and a whole lot of scores. He could count on the fingers of one hand the folk who were pleased to see him alive. Even missing a finger. And this was supposed to be his side of the fight.

Dogman had been right. Some wounds are best not picked at. Logen got up, his shoulders prickling, and walked back to the head of the fire, where the talk came easier. He'd no doubt Shivers wanted to kill him just as much as he ever had, but that was no surprise.

You have to be realistic. No words could ever make right the things he'd done.

Bad Debts

Superior Glokta,

Though I believe that we have never been formally introduced, I have heard your name mentioned often these past few weeks. Without causing offence, I hope, it seems as if every room I enter you have recently left, or are due soon to arrive in, and every negotiation I undertake is made more complicated by your involvement.

Although our employers are very much opposed in this business, there is no reason why we should not behave like civilised men. It may be that you and I can hammer out between us an understanding that will leave us both with less work and more progress.

I will be waiting for you at the slaughter-yard near the Four Corners tomorrow morning from six. My apologies for such a noisy choice of spot but I feel our conversation would be better kept private.

I daresay that neither one of us is to be put off by a little ordure underfoot.

Harlen Morrow,

Secretary to High Justice Marovia.

Being kind, the place stank. It would seem that a few hundred live pigs do not smell so sweet as one would expect. The floor of the shadowy warehouse was slick with their stinking slurry, the thick air full of their desperate noise. They honked and squealed, grunted and jostled each other in their writhing pens, sensing, perhaps, that the slaughterman's knife was not so very far away. But, as Morrow had observed, Glokta was not one to be put off by the noise, or the knives, or, for that matter, an unpleasant odour. I spend my days wading through the metaphorical filth, after all. Why not the real thing? The slippery footing was more of a problem. He hobbled with tiny steps, his leg burning. *Imagine arriving at my meeting caked in pig dung. That would hardly project the right image of fearsome ruthlessness, would it?*

He saw Morrow now, leaning on one of the pens. *Just like a farmer admiring his prize-winning herd.* Glokta limped up beside him, boots squelching, wincing and breathing hard, sweat trickling down his back. 'Well, Morrow, you know just how to make a girl feel special, I'll give you that.'

Marovia's secretary grinned up at him, a small man with a round face and eyeglasses. 'Superior Glokta, may I first say that I have nothing but the highest respect for your achievements in Gurkhul, your methods in negotiation, and—'

'I did not come here to exchange pleasantries, Morrow. If that's all your business I can think of sweeter-smelling venues.'

'And sweeter companions too, I do not doubt. To business, then. These are trying times.'

'I'm with you there.'

'Change. Uncertainty. Unease amongst the peasantry—'

'A little more than unease, I would say, wouldn't you?'

'Rebellion, then. Let us hope that the Closed Council's trust in Colonel Luthar will be justified, and he will stop the rebels outside the city.'

'I wouldn't trust his corpse to stop an arrow, but I suppose the Closed Council have their reasons.'

'They always do. Though, of course, they do not always agree with each other.' *They never agree about anything. It's practically a rule of the damn institution.* 'But it is those that serve them,' and Morrow peered significantly over the rims of his eye-glasses, 'that carry the burden for their lack of accord. I feel that we, in particular, have been stepping on each other's toes rather too much for either of our comfort.'

'Huh,' sneered Glokta, working his numb toes inside his boot. 'I do hope your feet aren't too bruised. I could never live with myself if I caused you to limp. Might you have a solution in mind?'

'You could say that.' He smiled down at the pigs, watching them squirm and grunt and clamber over one another. 'We had hogs on the farm, where I grew up.' *Mercy. Anything but the life story.* 'It was my responsibility to feed them. Rising in the morning, so early it was still dark, breath smoking in the cold.' *Oh, he paints a vivid picture! Young Master Morrow, up to his knees in filth, watching his pigs gorge themselves, and dreaming of escape. A brave new life in the glittering city!* Morrow grinned up at him, dim light twinkling on the lenses of his spectacles. 'You know, these things will eat anything. Even cripples.'

Ah. So that's it.

It was then that Glokta became aware of a man moving furtively towards them from the far end of the shed. A burly-looking man in a ragged coat, keeping to the shadows. He had his arm pressed tightly by his side, hand tucked up in his sleeve. *Just as if he were hiding a knife up there, and not doing it very well. Better just to walk up with a smile on your face and the knife in plain view. There are a hundred reasons to carry a blade in a slaughterhouse. But there can only ever be one reason to try and hide one.*

He glanced over his shoulder, wincing as his neck clicked. Another man, much like the first, was creeping up from that direction. Glokta raised his eyebrows. 'Thugs? How very unoriginal.'

'Unoriginal, perhaps, but I think you will find them quite effective.'

'So I'm to be slaughtered in the slaughterhouse, eh, Morrow? Butchered at the butchers! Sand dan Glokta, breaker of hearts, winner of the Contest, hero of the Gurmish war, shat out the arses of a dozen different pigs!' He snorted with laughter and had to wipe some snot off his top lip.

'I'm so glad you enjoy the irony,' muttered Morrow, looking slightly put out.

'Oh, I do. Fed to the swine. So obvious I can honestly say it's not what I expected.' He gave a long sigh. 'But not expected and not planned for are two quite different things.'

The bowstring made no sound over the clamour of the hogs. The thug seemed at first to slip, to drop his shining knife and fall on his side for no reason. Then Glokta saw the bolt poking from his side. *Not too great a surprise, of course, and yet it always seems like magic.*

The hired man at the other end of the warehouse took a shocked step back, never seeing Practical Vitari slip silently over the rail of the empty pen behind him. There was a flash of metal in the darkness as she slashed the tendons at the back of his knee and brought him down, his cry quickly shut off as she pulled her chain tight round his neck.

Severard dropped down easily from the rafters off to Glokta's left and squelched into the muck. He sauntered over, flatbow across his shoulder, kicked the fallen knife off into the darkness and looked down at the man he had shot. 'I owe you five marks,' he called to Frost. 'Missed his heart, damn it. Liver, maybe?'

'Lither,' grunted the albino, emerging from the shadows at the far end of the warehouse. The man struggled up to his knees, clutching at the shaft through his side, twisted face half crusted with filth. Frost lifted his stick as he passed and dealt him a crunching blow on the back of the head, putting a sharp end to his cries and knocking him face down in the muck. Vitari, meanwhile, had wrestled her man onto the floor and was kneeling on his back, dragging at the chain round his neck. His struggling grew weaker, and weaker, and stopped. *A little more dead meat on the floor of the slaughterhouse.*

Glokta looked back to Morrow. 'How quickly things can change, eh, Harlen? One minute everyone wants to know you. The next?' He tapped sadly at his useless foot with the filthy toe of his cane. 'You're fucked. It's a tough lesson.' *I should know.*

Marovia's secretary backed away, tongue darting over his lips, one hand held out in front of him. 'Now hold on—'

'Why?' Glokta pushed out his bottom lip. 'Do you really think we can grow to love each other again after all this?'

'Perhaps we can come to some—'

'I'm not upset that you tried to kill me. But to make such a pathetic effort at it? We're professionals, Morrow. It's an insult, that you thought this might work.'

'I'm hurt,' muttered Severard.

'Wounded,' sang Vitari, chain jingling in the darkness.

'Deethly othended,' grunted Frost, herding Morrow back towards the pen.

'You should have stuck to licking Hoff's big drunk arse. Or maybe you should have stayed on the farm, with your pigs. Tough work, perhaps, in the early morning, and so on. But it's a living.'

'Just wait! Just wuurgh—'

Severard grabbed Morrow's shoulder from behind, stabbed him through the side of his neck and chopped his throat out as calmly as if he was gutting a fish.

Blood showered over Glokta's boots and he stumbled back, wincing as pain shot up his ruined leg. 'Shit!' he hissed through his gums, nearly stumbling and falling on his arse in the filth, only managing to stay upright by clinging desperately to the fence beside him. 'Couldn't you just have strangled him?'

Severard shrugged. 'Same result, isn't it?' Morrow slid to his knees, eye-glasses skewed across his face, one hand clutching at his cut neck while blood bubbled out into his shirt collar.

Glokta watched the clerk tip onto his back, one leg kicking at the floor, his scraping heel leaving long streaks in the stinking muck. *Alas for the pigs on the farm. They will never now see young master Morrow coming back over the hill, returned from his brave life in the glittering city, his breath smoking in the cold, cold morning . . .*

The secretary's convulsions grew gentler, and gentler, and he lay still.

Glokta clung to the rail for a moment, watching the corpse. When was it exactly that I became . . . this? By small degrees, *I suppose. One act presses hard upon another, on a path we have no choice but to follow, and each time there are reasons. We do what we must, we do what we are told, we do what is easiest. What else can we do but solve one sordid problem at a time? Then one day we look up and find that we are . . . this.*

He looked at the blood gleaming on his boot, wrinkled his nose and wiped it off on Morrow's trouser leg. *Ah, well. I would love to spend more time on philosophy, but I have officials to bribe, and noblemen to blackmail, and votes to rig, and secretaries to murder, and lovers to threaten. So many knives to juggle. And as one clatters to the filthy floor, another must go up, blade spinning razor sharp above our heads. It never gets any easier.*

'Our magical friends are back in town.'

Severard lifted his mask and scratched behind it. 'The Magi?'

'The First of the bastards, no less, and his bold company of heroes. Him, and his slinking apprentice, and that woman. The Navigator too. Keep an eye on them, and see if there's a piglet we can separate from the herd. It's high time we knew what they were about. Do you still have your charming house, by the water?'

'Of course.'

'Good. Perhaps for once we can get ahead of the game, and when his Eminence demands answers we can have them to hand.' *And I can finally earn a pat on the head from my master.*

'What shall we do with these?' asked Vitari, jerking her spiky head towards the corpses.

Glokta sighed. 'The hogs will eat anything, apparently.'

The city was growing dark as Glokta dragged his ruined leg through the emptying streets and up towards the Agriont. The shopkeepers were closing their doors, the householders were lighting their lamps, candlelight spilling out into the dusky alleyways through chinks around the shutters. *Happy families settling down to happy dinners, no doubt. Loving fathers with their lovely wives, their adorable children, their full and meaningful lives. My heartfelt congratulations.*

He pressed his remaining teeth into his sore gums with the effort of maintaining his pace, sweat starting to dampen his shirt, his leg burning more and more with every lurching step. But I'm not stopping for this useless lump of dead meat. The pain crept up from ankle to knee, from knee to hip, from hip all the way up his twisted spine and into his skull. *All this effort just to kill a mid-level administrator, who worked no more than a few buildings away from the House of Questions in any case. It's a damn waste of my time, is what it is, it's a damn—*

'Superior Glokta?'

A man had stepped up, respectfully, his face in shadow. Glokta squinted at him. 'Do I—'

It was well done, there was no denying it. He was not even aware of the

other man until the bag was over his head and one of his arms was twisted behind his back, pushing him helplessly forward. He stumbled, fumbled his cane and heard it clatter to the cobbles.

‘Aargh!’ A searing spasm shot through his back as he tried unsuccessfully to drag his arm free, and he was forced to hang limp, gasping with pain inside the bag. In a moment they had his wrists tied and he felt a powerful hand shoved under each of his armpits. He was marched away with great speed, one man on each side, his feet barely scraping on the cobbles as they went. The fastest I’ve walked in a good long while, anyway. *Their grip was not rough, but it was irresistible. Professionals. An altogether better class of thug than Morrow stretched to. Whoever ordered this is no fool. So who did order it?*

Sult himself, or one of Sult’s enemies? One of his rivals in the race for the throne? High Justice Marovia? Lord Brock? Anyone on the entire Open Council? Or could it be the Gurmish? They have never been my closest friends. The banking house of Valint and Balk, perhaps, chosen finally to call in their debt? Might I have seriously misjudged young Captain Luthar, even? Or could it simply be Superior Goyle, no longer keen to share his job with the cripple? It was quite the list, now that he was forced to consider it.

He heard the footfalls slapping around him. Narrow alleys. He had no idea how far they had come. His breath echoed in the bag, rasping, throaty. *The heart thumps, the skin prickles with cold sweat. Excited. Scared, even. What might they want with me? People are not snatched from the street in order to be given promotions, or confections, or tender kisses, more’s the pity. I know why people are snatched from the street. Few better.*

Down a set of steps, the toes of his boots scuffing helplessly against the treads. The sound of a heavy door being heaved shut. Footsteps echoing in a tiled corridor. Another door closing. He felt himself dumped unceremoniously in a chair. *And now, no doubt, for better or worse, we shall find out . . .*

The bag was snatched suddenly from his head and Glotka blinked as harsh light stabbed at his eyes. *A white room, too bright for comfort. A type of room with which I am sadly familiar. And yet it looks so much uglier from this side of the table. Someone was sitting opposite. Or the blurry outline of a someone.* He closed one eye and peered through the other as his vision adjusted.

‘Well,’ he murmured. ‘What a surprise.’

‘A pleasant one, I hope.’

‘I suppose we’ll see.’ Carlot dan Eider had changed. *And it would seem that exile has not entirely disagreed with her.* Her hair had grown back, not all the way, perhaps, but more than far enough to manage a fetching style. The bruises round her throat had faded, there were only the very faintest of marks where her cheek had been covered in scabs. She had swapped traitor’s sackcloth for the travelling clothes of a lady of means, and looked extremely well in them. Jewels twinkled on her fingers, and around her neck. She seemed every bit as rich and sleek as when they first met. That, and she was smiling. *The smile of the player who holds all the cards. Why is it that I cannot learn? Never do a good turn. Especially not for a woman.*

A small pair of scissors lay on the table before her, within easy reach. Of the type that rich women use to trim their nails. *But just as good for trimming the skin from the soles of a man’s feet, for trimming his nostrils wider, for trimming his*

ears off, strip by slow strip . . .

Glokta found it decidedly difficult to move his eyes away from those polished little blades, shining in the bright lamplight. 'I thought I told you never to come back,' he said, but his voice lacked its customary authority.

'You did. But then I thought . . . why ever not? I have assets in the city that I was not willing to relinquish, and some business opportunities that I am keen to take advantage of.' She took up the scissors, trimmed the thinnest scrap from the corner of one already perfectly-shaped thumbnail, and frowned at the results. 'And it's hardly as though you'll be telling anyone I'm here, now, is it?'

'My concerns for your safety are all laid to rest,' grunted Glokta. *My concerns for my own, alas, grow with every moment. A man is never so crippled, after all, that he could not be more so.* 'Did you really need to go to all this trouble just to share your travel arrangements?'

Her smile grew somewhat broader, if anything. 'I hope my men didn't hurt you. I did ask them to be gentle. At least for the time being.'

'A gentle kidnapping is still a kidnapping, though, don't you find?'

'Kidnapping is such an ugly word. Why don't we think of it as an invitation difficult to resist? At least I let you keep your clothes, no?'

'That particular favour is a mercy to us both, believe me. An invitation to what, might I ask, beyond a painful manhandling and a brief conversation?'

'I'm hurt that you need more. But there was something else, since you mention it.' She pared away another sliver of nail with her scissors, and her eyes rolled up to his. 'A little debt left over, from Dagoska. I fear that I will not sleep easily until it is repaid.'

A few weeks in a black cell and a choking to the point of death? What form of repayment might that earn me? 'Please, then,' hissed Glokta through his gums, his eyelid flickering as he watched those blades snip, snip, snip. 'I can scarcely stand the suspense.'

'The Gurkish are coming.'

He paused for a moment, wrong-footed. 'Coming here?'

'Yes. To Midderland. To Adua. To you. They have built a fleet, in secret. They began building it after the last war, and now it is complete. Ships to rival anything the Union has.' She tossed her scissors down on the table and gave a long sigh. 'Or so I hear.'

The Gurkish fleet, just as my midnight visitor Yulwei told me. Rumours and ghosts, perhaps. But rumours are not always lies. 'When will they arrive?'

'I really couldn't say. The mounting of such an expedition is a colossal work of organisation. But then the Gurkish have always been so very much better organised than us. That's what makes doing business with them such a pleasure.'

My own dealings with them have been less than delightful, but still. 'In what numbers will they come?'

'A very great number, I imagine.'

Glokta snorted. 'Forgive me if I regard the words of a proven traitor with a certain scepticism, especially as you are rather thin on the details.'

'Have it your way. You're here to be warned, not convinced. I owe you that much, I think, for giving me my life.'

How wonderfully old-fashioned of you. 'And that is all?'

She spread her hands. 'Can a lady not trim her nails without giving offence?'

'Could you not simply have written?' snapped Glokta, 'and spared me the chafing on my under-arms?'

'Oh, come now. You never struck me as a man to bridle at a little chafing. Besides, it has given us the chance to renew a thoroughly enjoyable friendship. And you have to allow me my little moment of triumph, after what you put me through.'

I suppose that I can. I've had less charming threats, and at least she has better taste than to meet in a pig sty. 'I can simply walk away, then?'

'Did anyone pick up a cane?' No one spoke. Eider gave a happy smile, showing Glokta her perfect white teeth. 'You can crawl away, then. How does that sound?'

Better than floating to the top of the canal after a few days on the bottom, bloated up like a great pale slug and smelling like all the graves in the city. 'As good as I'll get, I suppose. I do wonder, though. What is to stop me having my Practicals follow the scent of expensive perfume after we are done here and finish what they started?'

'It is so very like you to say such a thing.' She sighed. 'I should inform you that an old and trustworthy business acquaintance of mine has a sealed letter in his possession. In the event of my death, it will be sent to the Arch Lector, laying out to him the exact nature of my sentence in Dagoska.'

Glokta sucked sourly at his gums. *Just what I need, another knife to juggle. 'And what will occur if, entirely independently from my actions, you succumb to the rot? Or a house falls on you? Or you choke on a slice of bread?'*

She opened her eyes very wide, as though the thought had only just occurred. 'In any of those cases . . . I suppose . . . the letter would be sent anyway, despite your innocence.' She gave a helpless laugh. 'The world is nothing like as fair a place as it should be, in my opinion, and I daresay that the natives of Dagoska, the enslaved mercenaries, and the butchered Union soldiers who you made fight for your lost cause would concur.' She smiled as sweetly as if they were discussing gardening. 'Things would probably have been far simpler for you if you'd had me strangled, after all.'

'You read my mind.' *But it is far too late now. I did a good thing, and so, of course, there is a price to be paid.*

'So tell me, before we part ways again, for what, we can both only hope, will be the last time – are you involved with this business of the vote?'

Glokta felt his eye twitch. 'My duties would seem to touch upon it.' *Indeed it occupies my every waking hour.*

Carlot dan Eider leaned forward to a conspiratorial distance, her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands. 'Who will be the next king of the Union, do you suppose? Will it be Brock? Isher? Will it be someone else?'

'A little early to say. I'm working on it.'

'Off you hobble, then.' She pushed out her bottom lip. 'And it's probably better if you don't mention our meeting to his Eminence.' She nodded, and Glokta felt the bag forced back over his face.

A Ragged Multitude

Jezal's command post, if you could use the phrase in relation to a man as utterly confused and clueless as he felt, was at the crest of a long rise. It offered a splendid view of the shallow valley below. At least, it would have been a splendid view in happier times. As things stood, it had to be admitted, the spectacle was far from pleasant.

The main body of the rebels entirely covered several large fields further down the valley, and a dark, and grubby, and threatening infestation they seemed, glinting in places with bright steel. Farming implements and tradesman's tools, perhaps, but sharp ones.

Even at this distance there was disturbing evidence of organisation. Straight, regular gaps through the men for the quick movement of messengers and supplies. It was plain, even to Jezal's unpractised eye, that this was as much an army as a mob, and that someone down there knew his business. A great deal better than he did, most likely.

Smaller, less organised groups of rebels were scattered far and wide across the landscape, each one a considerable body in its own right. Men sent foraging for food and water, picking the country clean. That crawling black mass on the green fields reminded Jezal of a horde of black ants crawling over a pile of discarded apple peelings. He had not the slightest idea how many of them there were, but it looked at this distance as though forty thousand might have been a considerable underestimate.

Down in the village in the bottom of the valley, behind the main mass of rebels, fires were burning. Bonfires or buildings it was hard to say, but Jezal rather feared the latter. Three tall columns of dark smoke rose up and drifted apart high above, giving to the air a faint and worrying tang of fire.

It was a commander's place to set a tone of fearlessness which his men would not be able to help but follow. Jezal knew that, of course. And yet, looking down that long, sloping field, he could not help but reflect on the very great number of men at the other end, so ominously purposeful. He could not stop his eyes from darting back towards their own lines, so thin, meagre, and uncertain-seeming. He could not avoid wincing and tugging uncomfortably at his collar. The damn thing still felt far too tight.

'How do you wish the regiments deployed, sir?' asked his adjutant, Major Opker, with a look which somehow managed to be both condescending and sycophantic all at once.

'Deployed? Er . . . well . . . ' Jezal racked his brains for something vaguely appropriate, let alone correct, to say. He had discovered early in his military career that if one has an effective and experienced officer above, coupled with effective and experienced soldiers below, one need do, and know, nothing. This strategy had stood him in fine stead for several comfortable peacetime years, but its one shortcoming was now starkly laid bare. If by some miracle

one rises to complete command, the system collapses entirely.

'Deployed . . .' he growled, furrowing his brow and trying to give the impression he was surveying the ground, though he had only a hazy idea what that even meant. 'Infantry in double line . . .' he ventured, remembering a fragment of some story Collem West had once told him. 'Behind this hedgerow here.' And he slashed his baton portentously across the landscape. The use of a baton, at least, he was expert in, having practiced extensively before the mirror.

'In front of the hedgerow, the Colonel means to say, of course,' threw in Bayaz smoothly. 'Infantry deployed in double line to either side of that milestone. The light cavalry in the trees there, heavy cavalry in a wedge on the far flank, where they can use the open field to their advantage.' He displayed an uncanny familiarity with military parlance. 'Flatbows in a single line behind the hedgerow where they will at first be hidden from the enemy, and can give them plunging fire from the high ground.' He winked at Jezal. 'An excellent strategy, Colonel, if I may say.'

'Of course,' sneered Opker, turning away to give the orders.

Jezal gripped tight to his baton behind his back, rubbing nervously at his jaw with the other hand. Evidently there was a lot more to command than simply being called 'sir' by everyone. He would really have to read some books when he got back to Adua. If he got back.

Three small dots had detached themselves from the crawling mass of humanity down in the valley and started moving up the rise toward them. Shading his eyes with his hand, Jezal could just see a shred of white moving in the air above them. A flag of parley. He felt Bayaz' decidedly uncomfortable hand on his shoulder.

'Don't worry, my boy, we are well prepared for violence. But I feel confident it will not come to that.' He grinned down at the vast mass of men below. 'Very confident.'

Jezal ardently wished he could have said the same.



For a famous demagogue, traitor, and inciter of riots, there was nothing in the least remarkable about the man known as the Tanner. He sat calmly in his folding chair at the table in Jezal's tent, an ordinary face under a mop of curly hair, a man of medium size in a coat of unexceptional style and colour, a grin on his face that implied he knew very well that he held the upper hand.

'They call me the Tanner,' he said, 'and I have been nominated to speak for the alliance of the oppressed, and the exploited, and the put-upon down in the valley. These are two of my partners in this righteous and entirely patriotic venture. My two generals, one might say. Goodman Hood,' and he nodded sideways at a burly man with a shovel beard, a ruddy complexion, and a seething frown, 'and Cotter Holst,' and he jerked his head the other way towards a weaselly type with a long scar on his cheek and a lazy eye.

'Honoured,' said Jezal warily, though they looked more like brigands than Generals as far as he was concerned. 'I am Colonel Luthar.'

'I know. I saw you win the Contest. Fine swordplay, my friend, very fine.'

'Oh, well, er . . .' Jezal was caught off guard, 'thank you. This is my adjutant, Major Opker, and this is . . . Bayaz, the First of the Magi.'

Goodman Hood snorted his disbelief, but the Tanner only stroked thoughtfully at his lip. 'Good. And you have come to fight, or negotiate?'

'We have come for either one.' Jezal embarked on his statement. 'The Closed Council, while condemning the method of your demonstration, concede that you may have legitimate demands—'

Hood made a rumbling snort. 'What choice have they got, the bastards?'

Jezal pressed on. 'Well, er . . . they have instructed me to offer you these concessions.' He held up the scroll that Hoff had prepared for him, a huge thing with elaborately carved handles and a seal the size of a saucer. 'But I must caution you,' doing his very best to sound confident, 'should you refuse, we are quite ready to fight, and that my men are the best trained, best armed, best prepared in the King's service. Each one of them is worth twenty of your rabble.'

The burly farmer gave a threatening chuckle. 'Lord Finster thought the same, and our rabble kicked his arse all the way from one end of his estates to the other. He would have got himself hung for his trouble if he'd had a slower horse. How fast is your horse, Colonel?'

The Tanner touched him gently on the shoulder. 'Peace, now, my fiery friend. We came to get terms, if we can get terms we can accept. Why not show us what you have there, Colonel, and we'll see if there is any need for threats.'

Jezal held out the weighty document and Hood snatched it angrily from his hand, tore it open and began to read, the thick paper crackling as it unrolled. The more he read, the grimmer grew his frown.

'An insult!' he snapped when he was done, giving Jezal a brooding stare. 'Lighter taxes and some shit about the use of common land? And that much they'll most likely never honour!' He tossed the scroll sideways to the Tanner, and Jezal swallowed. He had not the leanest understanding of the concessions or their possible shortcomings, of course, but Hood's response hardly seemed to promise an early agreement.

The Tanner's eyes moved lazily over the parchment. Different-coloured eyes, Jezal noticed: one blue, one green. When he got to the bottom he laid the document down and gave a theatrical sigh. 'These terms will do.'

'They will?' Jezal's eyes opened wide with surprise, but nowhere near as far as Goodman Hood's.

'But these are worse than the last terms we were offered!' shouted the farmer. 'Before we sent Finster's men running! You said then we could accept nothing but land for every man!'

The Tanner screwed his face up. 'That was then.'

'That was then?' muttered Hood, gaping with disbelief. 'What happened to honest wages for honest work? What happened to shares in the profit? What happened to equal rights no matter the cost? You stood there, and you promised me!' He shoved his hand towards the valley. 'You promised all of them! What's changed, except that Adua's within our grasp? We can take all we want! We can—'

'I say these terms will do!' snarled the Tanner with a sudden fury. 'Unless you care to fight the King's men on your own! They follow me, Hood, not you, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'But you promised us freedom, for every man! I trusted you!' The farmer's face hung slack with horror. 'We all trusted you.'

Jezal had never seen a man look so utterly indifferent as the Tanner did now. 'I suppose I must have that kind of face that people trust,' he droned, and his friend Holst shrugged and stared at his fingernails.

'Damn you, then! Damn you all!' And Hood turned and shoved angrily out through the tent flap.

Jezal was aware of Bayaz leaning sideways to whisper to Major Opker. 'Have that man arrested before he leaves the lines.'

'Arrested, my Lord, but . . . under a flag of parley?'

'Arrested, placed in irons, and conducted to the House of Questions. A shred of white cloth can be no hiding place from the King's justice. I believe Superior Goyle is handling the investigations.'

'Er . . . of course.' Opker rose to follow the Goodman out of the tent, and Jezal smiled nervously. There was no doubt that the Tanner had heard the exchange, but he grinned on as though the future of his erstwhile companion was no longer any of his concern.

'I must apologise for my associate. In a matter like this, you can't please everyone.' He gave a flamboyant wave of his hand. 'But don't worry. I'll give the little people a big speech, and tell them we have all we fought for, and they'll soon be off back to their homes with no real harm done. Some few will be determined to make trouble perhaps, but I'm sure you can round them up without much effort, eh, Colonel Luthar?'

'Er . . . well,' mumbled Jezal, left without the slightest idea of what was going on. 'I suppose that we—'

'Excellent.' The Tanner sprang to his feet. 'I fear I must now take my leave. All kinds of errands to be about. Never any peace, eh, Colonel Luthar? Never the slightest peace.' He exchanged a long glance with Bayaz, then ducked out into the daylight and was gone.

'If anyone should ask,' murmured the First of the Magi in Jezal's ear, 'I would tell them that it was a testing negotiation, against sharp and determined opponents, but that you held your nerve, reminded them of their duty to king and country, implored them to return to their fields, and so forth.'

'But . . .' Jezal felt like he wanted to cry, he was so baffled. Hugely baffled and hugely relieved at once. 'But I—'

'If anyone should ask.' There was an edge to Bayaz' voice that implied the episode was now finished with.

Beloved of the Moon

The Dogman stood, squinting into the sun, and watched the Union lads all shuffling past the other way. There's a certain look the beaten get, after a fight. Slow-moving, hunched-up, mud-spattered, mightily interested in the ground. Dogman had seen that look before often enough. He'd had it himself more'n once. Sorrowful they'd lost. Shamed they'd been beaten. Guilty, to have given up without getting a wound. Dogman knew how that felt, and a gnawing feeling it could be, but guilt was a sight less painful than a sword-cut, and healed a sight quicker.

Some of the hurt weren't so badly off. Bandaged or splinted, limping with a stick or with their arm round a mate's shoulders. Enough to get light duty for a few weeks. Others weren't so lucky. Dogman thought he knew one. An officer, hardly old enough for a beard, his smooth face all twisted up with white pain and shock, his leg off just above the knee, his clothes, and the stretcher, and the two men carrying him, all specked and spattered with dark blood. He was the one who'd sat on the gate, when Dogman and Threetrees had first come to Ostenhorm to join up with the Union. The one who'd looked at 'em like they were a pair of turds. He didn't sound so very clever now, squealing with every jolt of his stretcher, but it hardly made the Dogman smile. Losing a leg seemed like harsh punishment for a sneering manner.

West was down there by the path, talking to an officer with a dirty bandage round his head. Dogman couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could guess the gist. From time to time one of 'em would point up towards the hills they'd come from. A steep and nasty-looking pair, wooded mostly, with a few hard faces of bare rock showing. West turned and caught the Dogman's eye, and his face was grim as a gravedigger's. It hardly took a quick mind to see that the war weren't won quite yet.

'Shit,' muttered the Dogman, under his breath. He felt that sucking feeling in his gut. That low feeling he used to get whenever he had to scout out a new piece of ground, whenever Threetrees called for weapons, whenever there was nothing for breakfast but cold water. Since he was chief, though, he seemed to have it pretty much all the time. Everything was his problem now. 'Nothing doing?'

West shook his head as he walked up. 'Bethod was waiting for us, and in numbers. He's dug in on those hills. Well dug in and well prepared, between us and Carleon. More than likely he was ready for this before he even crossed the border.'

'He always did like to be ready, did Bethod. No way round him?'

'Kroy's tried both the roads and had two maulings. Now Poulder's tried the hills head on and had a worse one.'

Dogman sighed. 'No way round.'

'No way that won't give Bethod a nice chance to stick the knife right into

us.'

'And Bethod won't be missing no chance like that. It's what he'll be hoping for.'

'The Lord Marshal agrees. He wants you to take your men north.' West glared out at the grey whispers of other hills, further off. 'He wants you to look for a weakness. There's no way Bethod can cover the whole range.'

'Is there not?' asked Dogman. 'I guess we'll see.' Then he headed off into the trees. The boys were going to love this.

He strode up the track, soon came up on where his crew were camped out. They were growing all the time. Might've been four hundred now, all counted, and a tough crowd too. Those who'd never much cared for Bethod in the first place, mostly, who'd fought against him in the wars. Who'd fought against the Dogman as well, for that matter. The woods were choked up with 'em, sat round fires, cooking, polishing at weapons and working at gear, a couple having a practice at each other with blades. Dogman winced at the sound of steel clashing. There'd be more of that later, and with bloodier results, he didn't doubt.

'Chief!' they shouted at him. 'Dogman! The chief! Hey hey!' They clapped their hands and tapped their weapons on the rocks they sat on. Dogman held up his fist, and gave the odd half-grin, and said 'aye, good, good,' and all that. He still didn't have the slightest clue how to act like a chief, if the truth be told, so he just acted like he always had. The band all seemed happy enough, though. He guessed they always did. Until they started losing fights, and decided they wanted a new chief.

He came up on the fire where the pick of his Named Men were passing the day. No sign of Logen, but the rest of the old crew were sat round it, looking bored. Those that were still alive, leastways. Tul saw him coming. 'The Dogman's back.'

'Uh,' said Grim, trimming at some feathers with a razor.

Dow was busy mopping grease out of a pan with a chunk o' bread. 'How'd the Union get on with them hills, then?' And he had a sneer to his voice that said he knew the answer already. 'Make a shit from it, did they?'

'Well, they came out second, if that's what you're asking.'

'Second o' two sides is what I call shit.'

Dogman took a deep breath and let it pass. 'Bethod's dug in good, watching the roads to Carleon. No one can see an easy way to come at him, or an easy way around him neither. He was good and ready for this, I reckon.'

'I could've bloody told you that!' barked Dow, spraying out greasy crumbs. 'He'll have Littlebone on one o' them hills, and Whitesides on the other, then he'll have Pale-as-Snow and Goring further out. Those four won't be giving anyone any chances, but if they decide to, Bethod'll be sat behind with the rest, and his Shanka, and his fucking Feared, ready to snuff 'em out double-time.'

'More'n likely.' Tul held his sword up to the light, peered at it, then set to polishing up the blade again. 'Always liked to have a plan, did Bethod.'

'And what do them that hold our leash have to say?' sneered Dow. 'What sort of work's the Furious got for his animals?'

'Burr wants us to move north a way, through the woods, see if Bethod's left

a weak spot up there.'

'Huh,' snorted Dow. 'Bethod ain't in the habit of leaving holes. Not unless he's left one he means for us to fall into. Fall into and break our necks.'

'Well I guess we'd better be careful where we tread then, eh?'

'More bloody errands.'

Dogman reckoned he was getting about as sick of Dow's moaning as Threetrees used to be. 'And just what else would it be, eh? That's what life is. A bunch of errands. If you're worth a shit you do your best at 'em. What's got up your arse anyway?'

'This!' Dow jerked his head into the trees. 'Just this! Nothing's changed that much, has it? We might be over the Whiteflow, and back in the North, but Bethod's dug in good and proper up there, with no way for the Union to get round him that won't leave their arses hanging out. And if they do knock him off them hills, what then? If they get to Carleon and they get in, and they burn it just as good as Ninefingers did the last time, so what? Don't mean nothing. Bethod'll keep going, just like he always does, fighting and falling back, and there'll always be more hills to sit on, and more tricks to play. Time'll come, the Union will have had their fill and they'll piss off south and leave us to it. Then Bethod's going to turn around, and what d'you know? He'll be the one chasing us all the way across the fucking North and back. Winter, summer, winter, summer, and it's more of the same old shit. Here we are, fewer of us than there used to be, but still pissing around in the woods. Feel familiar?'

It did, somewhat, now it was mentioned, but Dogman didn't see what he could do about it. 'Logen's back, now, eh? That'll help.'

Dow snorted again. 'Hah! Just when did the Bloody-Nine bring anything but death along with him?'

'Steady now,' grunted Tul. 'You owe him, remember? We all do.'

'There's a limit on what a man should owe, I reckon.' Dow tossed his pan down by the fire and stood up, wiping his hands on his coat. 'Where's he been, eh? He left us up in the valleys without a word, didn't he? Left us to the Flatheads and pissed off halfway across the world! Who's to say he won't wander off again, if it suits him, or go over to Bethod, or set to murder over nothing, or the dead know what?'

Dogman looked at Tul, and Tul looked back, guilty. They'd all seen Logen do some damn dark work, when the mood was on him. 'That was a long time ago,' said Tul. 'Things change.'

Dow only grinned. 'No. They don't. Tell yourselves that tale if it makes you sleep easier, but I'll be keeping one eye open, I can tell you that! It's the Bloody-Nine we're talking of! Who knows what he'll do next?'

'I've one idea.' The Dogman turned round and saw Logen, leaning up against a tree, and he was starting to smile when he saw the look in his eye. A look Dogman remembered from way back, and dragged all kind of ugly memories up after it. That look the dead have, when the life's gone out of 'em, and they care for nothing any more.

'You got a thing to say then you can say it to my face, I reckon.' Logen walked up, right up close to Dow, with his head falling on one side, scars all pale on his hanging-down face. The Dogman felt the hairs on his arms standing up, cold feeling even though the sun was warm.

'Come on, Logen,' wheedled Tul, trying to sound like the whole business was all a laugh when it was plain as a slow death it was no such thing. 'Dow didn't mean nothing by it. He's just—'

Logen spoke right over him, staring Dow in the face with his corpse's eyes all the long while. 'I thought when I gave you the last lesson that you'd never need another. But I guess some folk have short memories.' He came in even closer, so close that their faces were almost touching. 'Well? You need a learning, boy?'

Dogman winced, sure as sure they'd set to killing one another, and how the hell he'd stop 'em once they started he hadn't the faintest clue. A tense moment all round, it seemed to last for ever. He wouldn't have taken that from any other man, alive or dead, Black Dow, not even Threetrees, but in the end he just split a yellow grin.

'Nah. One lesson's all I need.' And he turned his head sideways, hawked up and spat onto the ground. Then he backed off, no hurry, that grin still on his face, like he was saying he'd take a telling this time, maybe, but he might not the next.

Once he was gone, and no blood spilled, Tul blew out hard like they'd got away with murder. 'Right then. North, was it? Someone better get the lads ready to move.'

'Uh,' said Grim, sliding the last arrow into his quiver and following him off through the trees.

Logen stood there for a moment, watching 'em walk. When they'd got away out of sight he turned round, and he squatted down by the fire, hunched over with his arms resting on his knees and his hands dangling. 'Thank the dead for that. I nearly shit myself.'

Dogman realised he'd been holding onto his breath the whole while, and he let it rush out in a gasp. 'I think I might've, just a bit. Did you have to do that?'

'You know I did. Let a man like Dow take liberties and he won't ever stop. Then all the rest of these lads will get the idea that the Bloody-Nine ain't anything like so frightening as they heard, and it'll be a matter of time before someone with a grudge decides to take a blade to me.'

Dogman shook his head. 'That's a hard way of thinking about things.'

'That's the way they are. They haven't changed any. They never do.'

True, maybe, but they weren't ever going to change if no one gave 'em half a chance. 'Still. You sure all that's needful?'

'Not for you maybe. You got that knack that folk like you.' Logen scratched at his jaw, looking sadly off into the woods. 'Reckon I missed my chance at that about fifteen years ago. And I ain't getting another.'

The woods were warm and familiar. Birds twittered in the branches, not caring a damn for Bethod, or the Union, or any o' the doings of men. Nowhere had ever seemed more peaceful, and Dogman didn't like that one bit. He sniffed at the air, sifting it through his nose, over his tongue. He was double careful these days, since that shaft came over and killed Cathil in the battle.

Might have been he could've saved her, if he'd trusted his own nose a mite more. He wished he had saved her. But wishing don't help any.

Dow squatted down in the brush, staring off into the still forest. 'What is it, Dogman? What d'you smell?'

'Men, I reckon, but kind of sour, somehow.' He sniffed again. 'Smells like—'

An arrow flitted up out of the trees, clicked into the tree trunk just beside Dogman and stuck there, quivering.

'Shit!' he squealed, sliding down on his arse and fumbling his own bow off his shoulder, much too late as always. Dow slithered down cursing beside him and they got all tangled up with each other. Dogman nearly got his eye poked out on Dow's axe before he managed to push him off. He shoved his palm out at the men behind to say stop, but they were already scattering for cover, crawling for trees and rocks on their bellies, pulling out weapons and staring into the woods.

A voice drifted over from the forest ahead. 'You with Bethod?' Whoever it was spoke Northern with some strange-sounding accent.

Dow and Dogman looked at each other for a minute, then shrugged. 'No!' Dow roared back. 'And if you are, you'd best make ready to meet the dead!'

A pause. 'We're not with that bastard, and never will be!'

'Good enough!' shouted Dogman, putting his head up no more'n an inch, his bow full drawn and ready in his hands. 'Show yourselves, then!'

A man stepped out from behind a tree maybe six strides distant. Dogman was that shocked he nearly fumbled the string and let the shaft fly. More men started sliding out of the woods all round. Dozens of 'em. Their hair was tangled, their faces were smeared with streaks of brown dirt and blue paint, their clothes were ragged fur and half-tanned hides, but the heads of their spears, and the points of their arrows, and the blades of their rough-forged swords all shone bright and clean.

'Hillmen,' Dogman muttered.

'Hillmen we are, and proud of it!' A great big voice, echoing out from the woods. A few of 'em started to shuffle to one side, like they were making way for someone. Dogman blinked. There was a child coming between them. A girl, maybe ten years old, with dirty bare feet. She had a huge hammer over one shoulder, a thick length of wood a stride long with a scarred lump of iron the size of a brick for a head. Far and away too big for her to swing. It was giving her some trouble even holding it up.

A little boy came next. He had a round shield across his back, much too wide for him, and a great axe he was lugging along in both hands. Another boy was at his shoulder with a spear twice as high as he was, the bright point waving around above his head, gold twinkling under the blade in the strips of sunlight. He kept having to look up to make sure he didn't catch it on a branch.

'I'm dreaming,' muttered the Dogman. 'Aren't I?'

Dow frowned. 'If y'are it's a strange one.'

They weren't alone, the three children. Some huge bastard was coming up behind. He had a ragged fur round his great wide shoulders, and some big necklace hanging down on his great fat belly. A load of bones. Fingerbones, the Dogman saw as he got closer. Men's fingers, mixed up with flat bits of

wood, strange signs cut into them. He had a great yellow grin hacked out from his grey-brown beard, but that didn't put the Dogman any more at ease.

'Oh shit,' groaned Dow, 'let's go back. Back south and enough o' this.'

'Why? You know him?'

Dow turned his head and spat. 'Crummock-i-Phail, ain't it.'

Dogman almost wished it had turned out to be an ambush, now, rather than a chat. It was a fact that every child knew. Crummock-i-Phail, chief of the hillmen, was about the maddest bastard in the whole damn North.

He pushed the spears and the arrows gently out of his way as he came. 'No need for that now, is there, my beauties? We're all friends, or got the same enemies, at least, which is far better, d'you see? We all have a lot of enemies up in them hills, don't we, though? The moon knows I love a good fight, but coming at them great big rocks, with Bethod and all his arse-lickers stuck in tight on top? That's a bit too much fight for anyone, eh? Even your new Southern friends.'

He stopped just in front of them, fingerbones swinging and rattling. The three children stopped behind him, fidgeting with their great huge weapons and frowning up at Dow and the Dogman.

'I'm Crummock-i-Phail,' he said. 'Chief of all the hillmen. Or all the ones as are worth a shit.' He grinned as though he'd just turned up to a wedding. 'And who might be in charge o' this merry outing?'

Dogman felt that hollow feeling again, but there was nothing for it. 'That'd be me.'

Crummock raised his brows at him. 'Would it now? You're a little fellow to be telling all these big fellows just what to be about, are you not? You must have quite some name on your shoulders, I'm thinking.'

'I'm the Dogman. This is Black Dow.'

'Some strange sort of a crew you got here,' said Dow, frowning at the children.

'Oh it is! It is! And a brave one at that! The lad with my spear, that's my son Scofen. The one with my axe is my son Rond.' Crummock frowned at the girl with the hammer. 'This lad's name I can't remember.'

'I'm your daughter!' shouted the girl.

'What, did I run out of sons?'

'Scenn got too old and you give him 'is own sword, and Sceft's too small to carry nothing yet.'

Crummock shook his head. 'Don't hardly seem right, a bloody woman taking the hammer.'

The girl threw the hammer down on the ground and booted Crummock in his shin. 'You can carry it yourself then, y'old bastard!'

'Ah!' he squawked, laughing and rubbing his leg at once. 'Now I remember you, Isern. Your kicking's brought it all back in a rush. You can take the hammer, so you can. Smallest one gets the biggest load, eh?'

'You want the axe, Da?' The smaller lad held the axe up, wobbling.

'You want the hammer?' The girl dragged it up out the brush and shouldered her brother out the way.

'No, my loves, all I need for now is words, and I've plenty of those without your help. You can watch your father work some murder soon, if things run

smooth, but there'll be no need for axes or hammers today. We didn't come here to kill.'

'Why did you come here?' asked Dogman, though he wasn't sure he even wanted the answer.

'Right to business is it, and no time to be friendly?' Crummock stretched his neck to the side, his arms over his head, and lifted one foot and shook it around. 'I came here because I woke in the night, and I walked out into the darkness, and the moon whispered to me. In the forest, d'you see? In the trees, and in the voices of the owls in the trees, and d'you know what the moon said?'

'That you're mad as fuck?' growled Dow.

Crummock slapped his huge thigh. 'You've a pretty way of talking for an ugly man, Black Dow, but no. The moon said . . .' And he beckoned to the Dogman like he had some secret to share. 'You got the Bloody-Nine down here.'

'What if we do?' Logen came up quiet from behind, left hand resting on his sword. Tul and Grim came with him, frowning at all the painted-face hillmen stood about, and at the three dirty children, and at their great fat father most of all.

'There he is!' roared Crummock, sticking out one great sausage of a trembling finger. 'Take your fist off that blade, Bloody-Nine, before I piss my breaks!' He dropped down on his knees in the dirt. 'This is him! This is the one!' He shuffled forward through the brush and he clung to Logen's leg, pressing himself up against it like a dog to his master.

Logen stared down at him. 'Get off my leg.'

'That I will!' Crummock jerked away and dropped down on his fat arse in the dirt. Dogman had never seen such a performance. Looked like the rumours about him being cracked were right enough. 'Do you know a fine thing, Bloody-Nine?'

'More'n one, as it goes.'

'Here's another, then. I saw you fight Shama Heartless. I saw you split him open like a pigeon for the pot, and I couldn't have done it better my blessed self. A lovely thing to see!' Dogman frowned. He'd been there too, and he didn't remember much lovely about it. 'I said then,' and Crummock rose up to his knees, 'and I said since,' and he stood up on his feet, 'and I said when I came down from the hills to seek you out,' and he lifted up his arm to point at Logen. 'That you're a man more beloved of the moon than any other!'

Dogman looked over at Logen, and Logen shrugged. 'Who's to say what the moon likes or doesn't? What of it?'

'What of it, he says! Hah! I could watch him kill the whole world, and a thing of beauty it would be! The what of it is, I have a plan. It flowed up with the cold springs under the mountains, and was carried along in the streams under the stones, and washed up on the shore of the sacred lake right beside me, while I was dipping my toes in the frosty.'

Logen scratched at his scarred jaw. 'We've got work to be about, Crummock. You got something worth saying you can get to it.'

'Then I will. Bethod hates me, and the feeling's mutual, but he hates you more. Because you've stood against him, and you're living proof a man of the

North can be his own man, without bending on his knee and tonguing the arse of that golden-hat bastard and his two fat sons and his witch.' He frowned. 'Though I could be persuaded to take my tongue to her. D'you follow me so far?'

'I'm keeping up,' said Logen, but Dogman weren't altogether sure that he was.

'Just whistle if you drop behind and I'll come right back for you. My meaning's this. If Bethod were to get a good chance at catching you all alone, away from your Union friends, your crawling-like-ants sunny-weather lovers over down there yonder, then, well, he might give up a lot to take it. He might be coaxed down from his pretty hills for a chance like that, I'm thinking, hmmm?'

'You're betting that he hates me a lot.'

'What? Do you doubt that a man could hate you that much?' Crummock turned away, spreading his great long arms out wide at Tul and Grim. 'But it's not just you, Bloody-Nine! It's all of you, and me as well, and my three sons here!' The girl threw the hammer down again and planted her hands on her hips, but Crummock blathered on regardless. 'I'm thinking your boys join up with my boys and it might be we'll have eight hundred spears. We'll head up north, like we're going up into the High Places, to get around behind Bethod and play merry mischief with his arse end. I'm thinking that'll get his blood up. I'm thinking he won't be able to pass on a chance to put all of us back in the mud.'

The Dogman thought it over. Chances were that a lot of Bethod's people were jumpy about now. Worried to be fighting on the wrong side of the Whiteflow. Maybe they were hearing the Bloody-Nine was back, and thinking they'd picked the wrong side. Bethod would love to put a few heads on sticks for everyone to look at. Ninefingers, and Crummock-i-Phail, Tul Duru and Black Dow, and maybe even the Dogman too. He'd like that, would Bethod. Show the North there was no future in anything but him. He'd like it a lot.

'Supposing we do wander off north,' asked Dogman. 'How's Bethod even going to know about it?'

Crummock grinned wider than ever. 'Oh, he'll know because his witch'll know.'

'Bloody witch,' piped up the lad with the spear, his thin arms trembling as he fought to keep it up straight.

'That spell-cooking, painted-face bitch Bethod keeps with him. Or does she keep him with her? There's a question, though. Either way, she's watching. Ain't she, Bloody-Nine?'

'I know who you mean,' said Logen, and not looking happy. 'Caurib. A friend o' mine once told me she had the long eye.' Dogman didn't have the first clue about all that, but if Logen was taking it to heart he reckoned he'd better too.

'The long eye, is it?' grinned Crummock. 'Your friend's got a pretty name for an ugly trick. She sees all manner of goings-on with it. All kind of things it'd be better for us if she didn't. Bethod trusts her eyes before he trusts his own, these days, and he'll have her watching for us, and for you in particular. She'll have both her long eyes open for it, that she will. I may be no wizard,' and he

spun one of the wooden signs around and around on his necklace, 'but the moon knows I'm no stranger to the business neither.'

'And what if it goes like you say?' rumbled Tul, 'what happens then? Apart from we give Bethod our heads?'

'Oh, I like my head where it is, big lad. We draw him on, north by north, that's what the forest told me. There's a place up in the mountains, a place well loved by the moon. A strong valley, and watched over by the dead of my family, and the dead of my people, and the dead of the mountains, all the way back until when the world was made.'

Dogman scratched his head. 'A fortress in the mountains?'

'A strong, high place. High and strong enough for a few to hold off a many until help were to arrive. We lure him on up into the valley, and your Union friends follow up at a lazy distance. Far enough that his witch don't see 'em coming, she's so busy looking at us. Then, while he's all caught up in trying to snuff us out for good and all, the Southerners creep up behind, and—' He slapped his palms together with an echoing crack. 'We squash him between us, the sheep-fucking bastard!'

'Sheep-fucker!' cursed the girl, kicking at the hammer on the ground.

They all looked at each other for a moment. Dogman didn't much like the sound of this for a plan. He didn't much like the notion of trusting their lives to the say-so o' this crazy hillman. But it sounded like some kind of a chance. Enough that he couldn't just say no, however much he'd have liked to. 'We got to talk on this.'

'Course you do, my new best friends, course you do. Don't take too long about it though, eh?' Crummock grinned wide. 'I been down from the High Places for way too long, and the rest o' my beautiful children, and my beautiful wives, and the beautiful mountains themselves will all of them be missing me. Think on the sunny side o' this. If Bethod don't follow, you get a few nights sat up in the High Places as the summer dies, warming yourselves at my fire, and listening to my songs, and watching the sun going down over the mountains. That sound so bad? Does it?'

'You thinking of listening to that mad bastard?' muttered Tul, once they'd got out of earshot. 'Witches and wizards and all that bloody rubbish? He makes it up as he goes along!'

Logen scratched his face. 'He's nowhere near as mad as he sounds. He's held out against Bethod all these years. The only one who has. Twelve winters is it now, he's been hiding, and raiding, and keeping one foot ahead? Up in the mountains maybe, but still. He'd have to be slippery as fishes and tough as iron to make that work.'

'You trust him, then?' asked Dogman.

'Trust him?' Logen snorted. 'Shit, no. But his feud with Bethod's deeper even than ours is. He's right about that witch, I seen her, and I seen some other things this past year . . . if he says she'll see us, I reckon I believe him. If she doesn't, and Bethod don't come, well, nothing lost is there?'

Dogman had that empty feeling, worse'n ever. He looked over at Crummock, sitting on a rock with his children round him, and the madman smiled back a mouthful of yellow teeth. Hardly the man you'd want to hang all your hopes on, but Dogman could feel the wind changing. 'We'd be taking

one bastard of a risk,' he muttered. 'What if Bethod caught up to us and got his way?'

'We move fast, then, don't we!' growled Dow. 'It's a war. Taking risks is what you do if you reckon on winning!'

'Uh,' grunted Grim.

Tul nodded his big head. 'We've got to do something. I didn't come here to watch Bethod sit on a hill. He needs to be got down.'

'Got down where we can set to work on him!' hissed Dow.

'But it's your choice.' Logen clapped his hand down on the Dogman's shoulder. 'You're the chief.'

He was the chief. He remembered them deciding on it, gathered round Threetrees' grave. Dogman had to admit, he'd much rather have told Crummock to fuck himself, then turned round and headed back, and told West they never found a thing except woods. But once you've got a task, you get it done. That's what Threetrees would've said. Dogman gave a long sigh, that feeling in his gut bubbling up so high he was right on the point of puking. 'Alright. But this plan ain't going to get us anything but dead unless the Union are ready to do their part, and in good time too. We'll take it to Furious, and let their chief Burr know what we're about.'

'Furious?' asked Logen.

Tul grinned. 'Long story.'

Flowers and Plaudits

Jeza! still did not have the slightest idea why it was necessary for him to wear his best uniform. The damn thing was stiff as a board and creaking with braid. It had been designed for standing to attention in rather than riding, and, as a result, dug painfully into his stomach with every movement of his horse. But Bayaz had insisted, and it was surprisingly difficult to say no to the old fool, whether Jeza! was supposed to be in command of this expedition or not. It had seemed easier, in the end, just to do as he was told. So he rode at the head of the long column in some discomfort, constantly tugging at his tunic and sweating profusely in the bright sun. The one consolation was that he got to breathe fresh air. Everyone else had to eat his dust.

To further add to his pain, Bayaz was intent on continuing the themes that had made Jeza! so very bored all the way to the edge of the World and back.

‘. . . it is vital for a king to maintain the good opinion of his subjects. And it is not so very hard to do. The lowly have small ambitions, and are satisfied with small indulgences. They need not get fair treatment. They need only think that they do . . .’

Jeza! found that after a while he could ignore the droning of the old man’s voice, in the same way that one could ignore the barking of an old dog that barked all the time. He slumped into his saddle and allowed his thoughts to wander. And where else would they find their way, but to Ardee?

He had landed himself in quite a pickle, alright. Out on the plain, things had seemed so very simple. Get home, marry her, happily ever after. Now, back in Adua, back among the powerful, and back in his old habits, they grew more complicated by the day. The possibility of damage to his reputation and his prospects were issues that could not simply be dismissed. He was a Colonel in the King’s Own, and that meant certain standards to uphold.

‘. . . Harod the Great always had respect for the common man. More than once, it was the secret of his victories over his peers . . .’

And then Ardee herself was so much more complicated in person than she had been as a silent memory. Nine parts witty, clever, fearless, attractive. One part a mean and destructive drunk. Every moment with her was a lottery, but perhaps it was that sense of danger that struck the sparks when they touched, made his skin tingle and his mouth go dry . . . his skin was tingling now, even at the thought. He had never felt like this about a woman before, not ever. Surely it was love. It had to be. But was love enough? How long would it last? Marriage, after all, was forever, and forever was a very long time.

An indefinite extension of their current not-so secret romance would have been his preferred choice, but that bastard Glokta had stuck his ruined foot through that possibility. Anvils, and sacks, and canals. Jeza! remembered that white monster shoving his bag over a prisoner’s head on a public thoroughfare, and shuddered at the thought. But he had to admit that the

cripple was right. Jezal's visits were not good for that girl's reputation. One should treat others the way one would want to be treated, he supposed, just as Ninefingers had once said. But it certainly was a damned inconvenience.

'... are you even listening, my boy?'

'Eh? Er... yes, of course. Harod the Great, and so forth. The high respect he had for the common man.'

'Appeared to have,' grumbled Bayaz. 'And he knew how to take a lesson too.'

They were getting close to Adua now, passing out of the farmland and through one of the huddles of shacks, impromptu dwellings, cheap inns and cheaper brothels that had grown up around each of the city's gates, huddling about the road, each one almost a town in its own right. Up into the long shadow of Casamir's Wall, the outermost of the city's lines of defence. A dour guardsmen stood on either side of the high archway, gates marked with the Golden sun of the Union standing open. They passed through the darkness and out into the light. Jezal blinked.

A not inconsiderable number of people had gathered in the cobbled space beyond, pressing in on either side of the road, held back by members of the city watch. They burst into a chorus of happy cheers as they saw him ride through the gate. Jezal wondered for a moment if it was a case of mistaken identity, and they had been expecting someone of actual importance. Harod the Great, perhaps, for all he knew. He soon began to make out the name 'Luthar' repeated amongst the noise, however. A girl at the front flung a flower at him, lost under his horse's hooves, and shouted something he could not make out. But her manner left Jezal with no doubts. All these people had gathered for him.

'What's happening?' he whispered to the First of the Magi.

Bayaz grinned as though he, at least, had expected it. 'I imagine the people of Adua wish to celebrate your victory over the rebels.'

'They do?' He winced and gave a limp-wristed wave, and the cheering grew noticeably in volume. The crowd only thickened as they made their way into the city and the space reduced. There were people scattered up and down the narrow streets, people at the downstairs windows and people higher up, whooping and cheering. More flowers were thrown from a balcony high above the road. One stuck in his saddle and Jezal picked it up, turned it round and round in his hand.

'All this... for me?'

'Did you not save the city? Did you not stop the rebels, and without spilling a drop of blood on either side?'

'But they gave up for no reason. I didn't do anything!'

Bayaz shrugged, snatched the flower from Jezal's hand and sniffed at it, then tossed it away and nodded his head towards a clump of cheering tradesmen crowding a street corner. 'It would seem they disagree. Just keep your mouth shut and smile. That's always good advice.'

Jezal did his best to oblige, but the smiles were not coming easily. Logen Ninefingers, he was reasonably sure, would not have approved. If there was an opposite to trying to look like less than you were, then this, surely, was its very definition. He glanced nervously around, convinced that the crowds

would suddenly recognise him for the utter fraud he felt, and replace the flowers and calls of admiration with angry jeers and the contents of their chamber pots.

But it did not happen. The cheering continued as Jezal and his long column of soldiers worked their slow way through the Three Farms district. With each street Jezal passed down he relaxed a little more. He slowly began to feel as if he must indeed have achieved something worthy of the honour. To wonder if he might, in fact, have been a dauntless commander, a masterful negotiator. If the people of the city wished to worship him as their hero, he began to suppose it would be churlish to refuse.

They passed through a gate in Arnault's Wall and into the central district of the city. Jezal sat up tall in his saddle and puffed out his chest. Bayaz dropped behind to a respectful distance, allowing him to lead the column alone. The cheering mounted as they tramped down the wide Middleway, as they crossed the Four Corners towards the Agriont. It was like the feeling of victory at the Contest, only it had involved considerably less work, and was that really such an awful thing? What harm could it do? Ninefingers and his humility be damned. Jezal had earned the attention. He plastered a radiant smile across his face. He lifted his arm with self-satisfied confidence, and began to wave.

The great walls of the Agriont rose up ahead and Jezal crossed the moat to the looming south gatehouse, rode up the long tunnel into the fortress, the crackling hooves and tramping boots of the King's Own echoing in the darkness behind him. He processed slowly down the Kingsway, approvingly observed by the great stone monarchs of old and their advisers, between high buildings crammed with onlookers, and into the Square of Marshals.

Crowds had been carefully arranged on each side of the vast open space, leaving a long track of bare stone down the middle. At the far end a wide stand of benches had been erected, a crimson canopy in the centre denoting the presence of royalty. The noise and spectacle were breathtaking.

Jezal remembered the triumph laid on for Marshal Varuz when he returned from his victory over the Gurmish, remembered staring wide-eyed, little more than a child. He had caught one fleeting glimpse of the Marshal himself, seated high on a grey charger, but never imagined that one day he might ride in the place of honour. It still seemed strange, if he was honest. After all, he had defeated a bunch of peasants rather than the most powerful nation in the Circle of the World. Still, it was hardly his place to judge who was worthy of a triumph and who was not, was it?

And so Jezal spurred his horse forwards, passing between the rows of smiling faces, waving arms, through air thick with support and approval. He saw that the great men of the Closed Council were arranged across the front row of benches. He recognised Arch Lector Sult in shining white, High Justice Marovia in solemn black. His erstwhile fencing master, Lord Marshal Varuz, was there, Lord Chamberlain Hoff just beside him. All applauding, mostly with a faint disdain which Jezal found rather ungracious. In the midst, well propped up on a gilded chair, was the King himself.

Jezal, now fully adjusted to his role of conquering hero, dragged hard on the bridle making his steed rear up, front hooves thrashing theatrically at the air. He vaulted from the saddle, approached the royal dais, and sank

gracefully down on one knee, head bowed, the applause of the crowd echoing around him, to await the King's gratitude. Would it be too much to hope for a further promotion? Perhaps even a title of his own? It seemed suddenly hard to believe that he had been forced to consider a quiet life in obscurity, not so very long ago.

'Your Majesty . . . ' he heard Hoff saying, and he peered up from under his brows. The King was asleep, his eyes firmly closed, his mouth hanging open. Hardly a great surprise in its own way, the man was long past his best, but Jezal could not help being galled. It was the second time, after all, that he had slumbered through one of Jezal's moments of glory. Hoff nudged the monarch as subtly as possible with an elbow, but when he did not wake, was forced to lean close to whisper in his ear.

'Your Majesty—' He got no further. The King leaned sideways, his head slumping, and fell all of a sudden from his gilded chair, sprawling on his back before the stricken members of the Closed Council like a landed whale. His scarlet robe flopped open to reveal a great wet stain across his trousers and the crown tumbled from his head, bounced once and clattered across the flags.

There was a collective gasp, punctuated by a shriek from a lady near the back. Jezal could only stare, open mouthed, as the Lord Chamberlain flung himself down on his knees, bending over the stricken King. A silent moment passed, a moment in which every person in the Square of Marshals held their breath, then Hoff got slowly to his feet. His face had lost all of its redness.

'The King is dead!' he wailed, the tortured echoes ringing from the towers and buildings around the square. Jezal could only grimace. It was just his luck. Now no one would be cheering for him.

Too Many Knives

Logen sat on a rock, twenty strides from the track that Crummock was leading them up. He knew all the ways, Crummock-i-Phail, all the ways in the North. That was the rumour, and Logen hoped it was a fact. He didn't fancy being led straight into an ambush. They were heading north, towards the mountains. Hoping to draw Bethod down off his hills and up into the High Places. Hoping the Union would come up behind him, and catch him in a trap. An awful lot of hoping, that.

It was a hot, sunny day, and the earth under the trees was broken with shadow and slashed with bright sunlight, shifting as the branches moved in the wind, the sun slipping through and stabbing in Logen's face from time to time. Birds tweeted and warbled, trees creaked and rustled, insects floated in the still air, and the forest floor was spattered with clumps of flowers, white and blue. Summer, in the North, but none of it made Logen feel any better. Summer was the best season for killing, and he'd seen plenty more men die in good weather than in bad. So he kept his eyes open, looking out into the trees, watching hard and listening harder.

That was the task Dogman had given him. Staying out on the right flank, making sure none of Bethod's boys crept up while they were all spread out in file down that goat track. It suited Logen well enough. Kept him on the edge, where none of his own side might get tempted to try and kill him.

Watching men moving quiet through the trees, voices kept down low, weapons at the ready, brought back a rush of memories. Some good, some bad. Mostly bad, it had to be said. One man came away from the others as Logen watched, started walking towards him through the trees. He had a big grin on his face, just as friendly as you like, but that meant nothing, Logen had known plenty of men who could grin while they planned to kill you. He'd done it himself, and more than once.

He turned his body sideways a touch, sliding his hand down out of sight and curling it tight round the grip of a knife. You can never have too many knives, his father had told him, and that was strong advice. He looked around, slow and easy, just to make sure there was no one at his back, but there were only empty trees. So he shifted his feet for a better balance and stayed sitting, trying to look as if nothing worried him, but with every muscle tensed and ready to spring.

'My name's Red Hat.' The man stopped no more than a stride away, still grinning, his left hand slack on the pommel of his sword, the other just hanging.

Logen's mind raced, thinking over all the men he'd wronged, or hurt, or got bound up in a feud with. Those he'd left alive, anyway. Red Hat. He couldn't find a place for it anywhere, but that was no reassurance. Ten men with ten big books couldn't have kept track of all the enemies he'd made, and the

friends and the family and the allies of all his enemies. And that was without a man trying to kill him without much of a reason, just to make his own name bigger. 'Can't say I recognise the name.'

Red Hat shrugged. 'No reason you should do. I fought for Old Man Yawl, way back. He was a good man, was Yawl, a man you could respect.'

'Aye,' said Logen, still watching hard for a sudden move.

'But when he went back to the mud I got a place with Littlebone.'

'Never saw eye to eye with Littlebone, even when we were on the same side.'

'Neither did I, being honest. A right bastard. All bloated up with victories that Bethod won for him. Didn't sit well with me. That's why I came over, you know? When I heard Threetrees was here.' He sniffed and looked down at the earth. 'Someone needs to do something about that fucking Feared.'

'So they tell me.' Logen was hearing a lot about this Feared, and none of it good, but it'd take more than a few words in the right direction to get his hand off his knife.

'Still, the Dogman's a good chief, I reckon. One of the best I've had. Knows his business. Careful, like. Thinks about things.'

'Aye. Always thought he would be.'

'You think Bethod's following us?'

Logen didn't take his eyes from Red Hat's. 'Maybe he is, maybe he isn't. Don't reckon we'll know 'til we get up in the mountains and hear him knocking at the door.'

'You think the Union'll keep to their end of it?'

'Don't see why not. That Burr seems to know what he's about, far as I can tell, and his boy Furious as well. They said they'll come, I reckon they'll come. Not much we can do about it either way now, though, is there?'

Red Hat wiped some sweat from his forehead, squinting off into the trees. 'I reckon you're right. Anyway, all's I wanted to say was, I was in the battle, at Ineward. I was on the other side from you, but I saw you fight, and I kept well away, I can tell you that.' He shook his head, and grinned. 'Never saw anything like that, before or since. I suppose what I'm saying is, I'm happy to have you with us. Real happy.'

'Y'are?' Logen blinked. 'Alright, then. Good.'

Red Hat nodded. 'Well. That's all. See you in the fight, I reckon.'

'Aye. In the fight.' Logen watched him stride away through the trees, but even when Red Hat was well out of sight, he somehow couldn't make his hand uncurl from the grip of his knife, still couldn't lose the feeling that he had to watch his back.

Seemed he'd let himself forget what the North was like. Or he'd let himself pretend it would be different. Now he saw his mistake. He'd made a trap for himself, years ago. He'd made a great heavy chain, link by bloody link, and he'd bound himself up in it. Somehow he'd been offered the chance to get free, a chance he didn't come near to deserving, but instead he'd blundered back in, and now things were apt to get bloody.

He could feel it coming. A great weight of death, like the shadow of a mountain falling on him. Every time he said a word, or took a step, or had a thought, even, it seemed he'd somehow brought it closer. He drank it down

with every swallow, he sucked it in with every breath. He hunched his shoulders up and stared down at his boots, strips of sunlight across the toes. He should never have let go of Ferro. He should have clung to her like a child to its mother. How many things halfway good had he been offered in his life? And now he'd turned one down, and chosen to come back and settle some scores. He licked his teeth, and he spat sour spit out onto the earth. He should've known better. Vengeance is never halfway as simple, or halfway as sweet, as you think it's going to be.

'I bet you're wishing you didn't come back at all, eh?'

Logen jerked his head up, on the point of pulling the knife and setting to work. Then he saw it was only Tul standing over him. He pushed the blade away and let his hands drop. 'Do you know what? The thought had occurred.'

The Thunderhead squatted down beside him. 'Sometimes I find my own name's a heavy weight to carry. Dread to think how a name like yours must drag at a man.'

'It can seem a burden.'

'I bet it can.' Tul watched the men moving past, single file, down on the dusty track. 'Don't mind 'em. They'll get used to you. And if things get low, well, you've always got Black Dow's smile to fall back on, eh?'

Logen grinned. 'That's true. It's quite the smile he has, that man. It seems to light up the whole world, don't it?'

'Like sunshine on a cloudy day.' Tul sat down on the rock next to him, pulled the stopper from his canteen and held it out. 'I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry? For what?'

'That we didn't look for you, after you went over that cliff. Thought you were dead.'

'Can't say I hold much of a grudge for that. I was pretty damn sure I was dead myself. I'm the one should have gone looking for you lot, I reckon.'

'Well. Should've looked for each other, maybe. But I guess you learn to stop hoping, after a while. Life teaches you to expect the worst, eh?'

'You have to be realistic, I reckon.'

'That you do. Still, it came out alright. Back with us now, aren't you?'

'Aye.' Logen sighed. 'Back to warring, and bad food, and creeping through woods.'

'Woods,' grunted Tul, and he split a big grin. 'Will I ever get tired of 'em?'

Logen took a drink from the canteen, then handed it back, and Tul took a swig himself. They sat there, silent, for a minute.

'I didn't want this, you know, Tul.'

'Course not. None of us wanted this. Don't mean we don't deserve it, though, eh?' Tul slapped his big hand down on Logen's shoulder. 'You need to talk it over, I'm around.'

Logen watched him go. He was a good man, the Thunderhead. A man that could be trusted. There were still a few left. Tul, and Grim, and the Dogman. Black Dow too, in his own way. It almost gave Logen some hope, that did. Almost made him glad that he chose to come back to the North. Then he looked back at the file of men and he saw Shivers in there, watching him. Logen would have liked to look away, but looking away wasn't something the Bloody-Nine could do. So he sat there on his rock, and they stared at each

other, and Logen felt the hatred digging at him until Shivers was lost through the trees. He shook his head again, and sucked his teeth again, and spat.

You can never have too many knives, his father had told him. Unless they're pointed at you, and by people who don't like you much.

Best of Enemies

‘Tap, tap.’ ‘Not now!’ stormed Colonel Glokta. ‘I have all these to get through!’ There must have been ten thousand papers of confession for him to sign. His desk was groaning with great heaps of them, and the nib of his pen was soft as butter. What with the red ink, his marks looked like dark bloodstains sprayed across the pale paper. ‘Damn it!’ he raged as he knocked over the bottle with his elbow, splashing ink out over the desk, soaking into the piles of papers, dripping to the floor with a steady tap, tap, tap.

‘There will be time later for you to confess. Ample time.’

The Colonel frowned. The air had grown decidedly chill. ‘You again! Always at the worst times!’

‘You remember me, then?’

‘I seem to . . .’ In truth, the Colonel was finding it hard to recall from where. It looked like a woman in the corner, but he could not make out her face.

‘The Maker fell burning . . . he broke upon the bridge below . . .’ The words were familiar, but Glokta could not have said why. Old stories and nonsense. He winced. Damn it but his leg hurt.

‘I seem to . . .’ His usual confidence was all ebbing away. The room was icy cold now, he could see his breath smoking before his face. He stumbled up from his chair as his unwelcome visitor came closer, his leg aching with a vengeance. ‘What do you want?’ he managed to croak.

The face came into the light. It was none other than Mauthis, from the banking house of Valint and Balk. ‘The Seed, Colonel.’ And he smiled his joyless smile. ‘I want the Seed.’

‘I . . . I . . .’ Glokta’s back found the wall. He could go no further.

‘The Seed!’ Now it was Goyle’s face, now Sult’s, now Severard’s, but they all made the same demand. ‘The Seed! I lose patience!’

‘Bayaz,’ he whispered, squeezing his eyes closed, tears running out from underneath his lids. ‘Bayaz knows—’

‘Tap, tap, torturer.’ The woman’s hissing voice again. A finger-tip jabbed at the side of his head, painfully hard. ‘If that old liar knew, it would be mine already. No. You will find it.’ He could not speak for fear. ‘You will find it, or I will tear the price from your twisted flesh. So tap, tap, time to wake.’

The finger stabbed at his skull again, digging into the side of his head like a dagger blade. ‘Tap, tap, cripple!’ hissed the hideous voice in his ear, breath so cold it seemed to burn his bare cheek. ‘Tap, tap!’

Tap, tap.

For a moment Glokta hardly knew where he was. He jerked upright, struggling with the sheets, staring about him, hemmed in on every side by

threatening shadows, his own whimpering breath hissing in his head. Then everything fell suddenly into place. My new apartments. A pleasant breeze stirred the curtains in the sticky night, washing through the one open window. Glokta saw its shadow shifting on the rendered wall. It swung shut against the frame, open, then shut again.

Tap, tap.

He closed his eyes and breathed a long sigh. Winced as he sagged back in his bed, stretching his legs out, working his toes against the cramps. *Those toes the Gurmish left me, at least. Only another dream. Everything is—*

Then he remembered, and his eyes snapped wide open. *The King is dead. Tomorrow we elect a new one.*

The three hundred and twenty papers were hanged, lifeless, from their nails. They had grown more and more creased, battered, greasy and grubby over the past few weeks. *As the business itself has slid further into the filth.* Many were ink smudged, covered with angrily scrawled notes, with fillings-in and crossings-out. *As men were bought and sold, bullied and blackmailed, bribed and beguiled.* Many were torn where wax had been removed, added, replaced with other colours. *As the allegiances shifted, as the promises were broken, as the balance swung this way and that.*

Arch Lector Sult stood glaring at them, like a shepherd at his troublesome flock, his white coat rumpled, his white hair in disarray. Glokta had never before seen him look anything less than perfectly presented. *He must, at last, taste blood. His own. I would almost want to laugh, if my own mouth were not so terribly salty.*

‘Brock has seventy-five,’ Sult was hissing to himself, white gloved hands fussing with each other behind his back. ‘Brock has seventy-five. Isher has fifty-five. Skald and Barezin, forty a piece. Brock has seventy-five . . .’ He muttered the numbers over and over, as though they were a charm to protect him from evil. *Or from good, perhaps.* ‘Isher has fifty-five . . .’

Glokta had to suppress a smile. *Brock, then Isher, then Skald and Barezin, while the Inquisition and Judiciary struggle over scraps. For all our efforts, the shape of things is much the same as when we began this ugly dance. We might as well have led the country then and saved ourselves the trouble. Perhaps it is still not too late . . .*

Glokta noisily cleared his throat and Sult’s head jerked round. ‘You have something to contribute?’

‘In a manner of speaking, your Eminence,’ Glokta kept his tone as servile as he possibly could. ‘I received some rather . . . troubling information recently.’

Sult scowled, and nodded his head at the papers. ‘More troubling than this?’

Equally, at any rate. After all, whoever wins the vote will have but a brief celebration if the Gurmish arrive and slaughter the lot of us a week later. It has been suggested to me . . . that the Gurmish are preparing to invade Middelrand.’

There was a brief, uncomfortable pause. *Scarcely a promising reception, but we have set sail now. What else to do but steer straight for the storm? ‘Invade?’*

sneered Goyle. 'With what?'

'It is not the first time I have been told they have a fleet.' *Trying desperately to patch my foundering vessel.* 'A considerable fleet, built in secret, after the last war. We could easily make some preparations, then if the Gurmish do come—'

'And what if you are wrong?' The Arch Lector was frowning mightily. 'From whom did this information come?'

Oh, dear me no, that would never do. Carlot dan Eider? Alive? But how? Body found floating by the docks . . . 'An anonymous source, Arch Lector.'

'Anonymous?' His Eminence glowered through narrowed eyes. 'And you would have me go to the Closed Council, at a time like this, and put before them the unproven gossip of your anonymous source?' *The waves swamp the deck . . .*

'I merely wished to alert your Eminence to the possibility—'

'When are they coming?' *The torn sailcloth flaps in the gale . . .*

'My informant did not—'

'Where will they land?' *The sailors topple screaming from the rigging . . .*

'Again, your Eminence I cannot—'

'What will be their numbers?' *The wheel breaks off in my shaking hands . . .*

Glokta winced, and decided not to speak at all.

'Then kindly refrain from distracting us with rumours,' sneered Sult, his lip twisted with contempt. *The ship vanishes beneath the merciless waves, her cargo of precious warnings consigned to the deep, and her captain will not be missed.* 'We have more pressing concerns than a legion of Gurmish phantoms!'

'Of course, your Eminence.' *And if the Gurmish come, who will we hang? Oh, Superior Glokta, of course. Why ever did that damn cripple not speak up?*

Sult's mind had already slipped back into its well-worn circles. 'We have thirty-one votes and Marovia has something over twenty. Thirty-one. Not enough to make the difference.' He shook his head grimly, blue eyes darting over the papers. *As if there were some new way to look at them that would alter the terrible mathematics.* 'Nowhere near enough.'

'Unless we were to come to an understanding with High Justice Marovia.' Again, a pause, even more uncomfortable than last time. Oh dear. I must have said that out loud.

'An understanding?' hissed Sult.

'With Marovia?' squealed Goyle, his eyes bulging with triumph. *When the safe options are all exhausted, we must take risks. Is that not what I told myself as I rode down to the bridge, while the Gurmish massed upon the other side? Ah well, once more into the tempest . . .*

Glokta took a deep breath. 'Marovia's seat on the Closed Council is no safer than anyone else's. We may have been working against each other, but only out of habit. On the subject of this vote our aims are the same. To secure a weak candidate and maintain the balance. Together you have more than fifty votes. That might well be enough to tip the scales.'

Goyle sneered his contempt. 'Join forces with that peasant-loving hypocrite? Have you lost your reason?'

'Shut up, Goyle.' Sult glared at Glokta for a long while, his lips pursed in thought. *Considering my punishment, perhaps? Another tongue-lashing? Or a real lashing? Or my body found floating—* 'You are right. Go and speak to Marovia.'

Sand dan Glokta, once more the hero! Goyle's jaw hung open. 'But . . . your Eminence!'

'The time for pride is far behind us!' snarled Sult. 'We must seize any chance of keeping Brock and the rest from the throne. We must find compromises, however painful, and we must take whatever allies we can. Go!' he hissed over his shoulder, folding his arms and turning back to his crackling papers. 'Strike a deal with Marovia.'

Glokta got stiffly up from his chair. *A shame to leave such lovely company, but when duty calls . . .* He treated Goyle to the briefest of toothless smiles, then took up his cane and limped for the door.

'And Glokta!' He winced as he turned back into the room. 'Marovia's aims and ours may meet for now. But we cannot trust him. Tread carefully.'

'Of course, your Eminence.' *I always do. What other choice, when every step is agony?*

The private office of the High Justice was as big as a barn, its ceiling covered in festoons of old moulding, riddled with shadows. Although it was only late afternoon, the thick ivy outside the windows, and the thick grime on the panes, had sunk the place into a perpetual twilight. Tottering heaps of papers were stacked on every surface. Wedges of documents tied with black tape. Piles of leather-bound ledgers. Stacks of dusty parchments in ostentatious, swirling script, stamped with huge seals of red wax and glittering gilt. A kingdom's worth of law, it looked like. *And, indeed, it probably is.*

'Superior Glokta, good evening.' Marovia himself was seated at a long table near the empty fireplace, set for dinner, a flickering candelabra making each dish glisten in the gloom. 'I hope you do not mind if I eat while we talk? I would rather dine in the comfort of my rooms, but I find myself eating here more and more. So much to do, you see? And one of my secretaries appears to have taken a holiday unannounced.' *A holiday to the slaughterhouse floor, in fact, by way of the intestines of a herd of swine.* 'Would you care to join me?' Marovia gestured at a large joint of meat, close to raw in the centre, swimming in bloody gravy.

Glokta licked at his empty gums as he manoeuvred himself into a chair opposite. 'I would be delighted, your Worship, but the laws of dentistry prevent me.'

'Ah, of course. Those laws there can be no circumventing, even by a High Justice. You have my sympathy, Superior. One of my greatest pleasures is a good cut of meat, and the bloodier the better. Just show them the flame, I always tell my cook. Just show it to them.' *Funny. I tell my Practicals to start the same way.* 'And to what do I owe this unexpected visit? Do you come on your own initiative, or at the urging of your employer, my esteemed colleague from the Closed Council, Arch Lector Sult?'

Your bitter mortal enemy from the Closed Council, do you mean? 'His Eminence is aware that I am here.'

'Is he?' Marovia carved another slice and lifted it dripping onto his plate. 'And with what message has he sent you? Something relating to tomorrow's

business in the Open Council, perhaps?’

‘You spoil my surprise, your Worship. May I speak plainly?’

‘If you know how.’

Glokta showed the High Justice his empty grin. ‘This affair with the vote is a terrible thing for business. The doubt, the uncertainty, the worry. Bad for everyone’s business.’

‘Some more than others.’ Marovia’s knife squealed against the plate as he slit a ribbon of fat from the edge of his meat.

‘Of course. At particular risk are those that sit on the Closed Council, and those that struggle on their behalf. They are unlikely to be given such a free hand if powerful men such as Brock or Isher are voted to the throne.’ *Some of us, indeed, are unlikely to live out the week.*

Marovia speared a slice of carrot with his fork and stared sourly at it. ‘A lamentable state of affairs. It would have been preferable for all concerned if Raynault or Ladisla were still alive.’ He thought about it for a moment. ‘If Raynault were still alive, at least. But the vote will take place tomorrow, however much we might tear our hair. It is hard now to see our way to a remedy.’ He looked from the carrot to Glokta. ‘Or do you suggest one?’

‘You, your Worship, control between twenty and thirty votes on the Open Council.’

Marovia shrugged. ‘I have some influence, I cannot deny it.’

‘The Arch Lector can call on thirty votes himself.’

‘Good for his Eminence.’

‘Not necessarily. If the two of you oppose each other, as you always have, your votes will mean nothing. One for Isher, the other for Brock, and no difference made.’

Marovia sighed. ‘A sad end to our two glittering careers.’

‘Unless you were to pool your resources. Then you might have sixty votes between you. As many, almost, as Brock controls. Enough to make a King of Skald, or Barezin, or Heugen, or even some unknown, depending on how things go. Someone who might be more easily influenced in the future. Someone who might keep the Closed Council he has, rather than selecting a new one.’

‘A King to make us all happy, eh?’

‘If you were to express a preference for one man or another, I could take that back to his Eminence.’ *More steps, more coaxing, more disappointments. Oh, to have a great office of my own, and to sit all day in comfort while cringing bastards slog up my stairs to smile at my insults, lap up my lies, beg for my poisonous support.*

‘Shall I tell you what would make me happy, Superior Glokta?’

Now for the musings of another power-mad old fart. ‘By all means, your Worship.’

Marovia tossed his cutlery onto his plate, sat back in his chair and gave a long, tired sigh. ‘I would like no King at all. I would like every man equal under the law, to have a say in the running of his own country and the choosing of his own leaders. I would like no King, and no nobles, and a Closed Council selected by, and answerable to, the citizens themselves. A Closed Council open to all, you might say. What do you think of that?’

I think some people would say that it sounds very much like treason. The rest would simply call it madness. ‘I think, your Worship, that your notion is a fantasy.’

‘Why so?’

‘Because the vast majority of men would far rather be told what to do than make their own choices. Obedience is easy.’

The High Justice laughed. ‘Perhaps you are right. But things will change. This rebellion has convinced me of it. Things will change, by small steps.’

‘I am sure Lord Brock on the throne is one small step none of us would like to see taken.’

‘Lord Brock does indeed have very strong opinions, mostly relating to himself. You make a convincing case, Superior.’ Marovia sat back in his chair, hands resting on his belly, staring at Glokta through narrowed eyes. ‘Very well. You may tell Arch Lector Sult that this once we have common cause. If a neutral candidate with sufficient support presents themselves, I will have my votes cast along with his. Who could have thought it? The Closed Council united.’ He slowly shook his head. ‘Strange times indeed.’

‘They certainly are, your Worship.’ Glokta struggled to his feet, wincing as he put his weight on his burning leg, and shuffled across the gloomy, echoing space towards the door. *Strange, though, that our High Justice is so philosophical on the subject of losing his position tomorrow. I have scarcely ever seen a man look calmer. He paused as he touched the handle of the door. One would almost suppose that he knows something we do not. One might almost suppose that he already has a plan in mind.*

He turned back. ‘Can I trust you, High Justice?’

Marovia looked sharply up, the carving knife poised in his hand. ‘What a beautifully quaint question from a man in your line of work. I suppose that you can trust me to act in my own interests. Just as far as I can trust you to do the same. Our deal goes no further than that. Nor should it. You are a clever man, Superior, you make me smile.’ And he turned back to his joint of meat, prodding at it with a fork and making the blood run. ‘You should find another master.’

Glokta shuffled out. *A charming suggestion. But I already have two more than I'd like.*

The prisoner was a scrawny, sinewy specimen, naked and bagged as usual, with hands manacled securely behind his back. Glokta watched as Frost dragged him into the domed room from the cells, his stumbling bare feet flapping against the cold floor.

‘He wasn’t too hard to get a hold of,’ Severard was saying. ‘He left the others a while ago, but he’s been hanging round the city like the smell of piss ever since. We picked him up yesterday night.’

Frost flung the prisoner down in the chair. *Where am I? Who has me? What do they want? A horrifying moment, just before the work begins. The terror and the helplessness, the sick tingling of anticipation. My own memory of it was sharply refreshed, only the other day, at the hands of the charming Magister Eider. I was set*

free unmolested, however. The prisoner sat there, head tilted to one side, the canvas on the front of the bag moving back and forth with his hurried breath. I very much doubt that he will be so lucky.

Glokta's eyes crept reluctantly to the painting above the prisoner's bagged head. *Our old friend Kanedias.* The painted face stared grimly down from the domed ceiling, the arms spread wide, the colourful fire behind. *The Maker fell burning . . .* He weighed the heavy hammer reluctantly in his hand. 'Let's get on with it, then.' Severard snatched the canvas bag away with a showy flourish.

The Navigator squinted into the bright lamplight, a weather-beaten face, tanned and deeply lined, head shaved, like a priest. *Or a confessed traitor, of course.*

'Your name is Brother Longfoot?'

'Indeed! Of the noble Order of Navigators! I assure you that I am innocent of any crime!' The words came out in rush. 'I have done nothing unlawful, no. That would not be my way at all. I am a law-abiding man, and always have been. I can think of no possible reason why I should be manhandled in this way! None!' His eyes swivelled down and he saw the anvil, gleaming on the floor between him and Glokta, where the table would usually have been. His voice rose an entire octave higher. 'The Order of Navigators is well respected, and I am a member in good standing! Exceptional standing! Navigation is the foremost of my many remarkable talents, it is indeed, the foremost of—'

Glokta cracked his hammer against the top of the anvil with a clang to wake the dead. 'Stop! Talking!' The little man blinked, and gaped, but he shut up. Glokta sank back in his chair, kneading at his withered thigh, the pain prickling up his back. 'Do you have any notion of how tired I am? Of how much I have to do? The agony of getting out of bed each morning leaves me a broken man before the day even begins, and the present moment is an exceptionally stressful one. It is therefore a matter of the most supreme indifference to me whether you can walk for the rest of your life, whether you can see for the rest of your life, whether you can hold your shit in for the rest of your intensely short, intensely painful life. Do you understand?'

The Navigator looked wide-eyed up at Frost, looming over him like an outsize shadow. 'I understand,' he whispered.

'Good,' said Severard.

'Ve' gooth,' said Frost.

'Very good indeed,' said Glokta. 'Tell me, Brother Longfoot, is one among your remarkable talents a superhuman resistance to pain?'

The prisoner swallowed. 'It is not.'

'Then the rules of this game are simple. I ask a question and you answer precisely, correctly, and, above all, briefly. Do I make myself clear?'

'I understand completely. I do not speak other than to—'

Frost's fist sunk into his gut and he folded up, eyes bulging. 'Do you see,' hissed Glokta, 'that your answer there should have been yes?' The albino seized the wheezing Navigator's leg and dragged his foot up onto the anvil. *Oh, cold metal on the sensitive sole. Quite unpleasant, but it could be so much worse. And something tells me it probably will be.* Frost snapped a manacle shut around Longfoot's ankle.

'I apologise for the lack of imagination.' Glokta sighed. 'In our defence, it's difficult to be always thinking of something new. I mean, smashing a man's feet with a lump hammer, it's so . . .'

'Pethethrian?' ventured Frost.

Glokta heard a sharp volley of laughter from behind Severard's mask, felt his own mouth grinning too. *He really should have been a comedian, rather than a torturer.* 'Pedestrian! Precisely so. But don't worry. If we haven't got what we need by the time we've crushed everything below your knees to pulp, we'll see if we can think of something more inventive for the rest of your legs. How does that sound?'

'But I have done nothing!' squealed Longfoot, just getting his breath back. 'I know nothing! I did—'

'Forget . . . about all that. It is meaningless now.' Glokta leaned slowly, painfully forwards, let the head of the hammer tap gently against the iron beside the Navigator's bare foot. 'What I want you to concentrate on . . . are my questions . . . and your toes . . . and this hammer. But don't worry if you find that difficult now. Believe me when I say – once the hammer starts falling, you will find it easy to ignore everything else.'

Longfoot stared at the anvil, nostrils flaring as his breath snorted quickly in and out. *And the seriousness of the situation finally impresses itself upon him.*

'Questions, then,' said Glokta. 'You are familiar with the man who styles himself Bayaz, the First of the Magi?'

'Yes! Please! Yes! Until recently he was my employer.'

'Good.' Glokta shifted in his chair, trying to find a more comfortable position while bending forwards. 'Very good. You accompanied him on a journey?'

'I was the guide!'

'What was your destination?'

'The Island of Shabulyan, at the edge of the World.'

Glokta let the head of the hammer click against the anvil again. 'Oh come, come. The edge of the World? A fantasy, surely?'

'Truly! Truly! I have seen it! I stood upon that island with my own feet!'

'Who went with you?'

'There was . . . was Logen Ninefingers, from the distant North.' *Ah, yes, he of the scars and the tight lips.* 'Ferro Maljinn, a Kantic woman.' *The one that gave our friend Superior Goyle so much trouble.* 'Jezal dan Luthar, a . . . a Union officer.' A posturing dolt. 'Malacus Quai, Bayaz' apprentice.' *The skinny liar with the troglodyte's complexion.* 'And then Bayaz himself!'

'Six of you?'

'Only six!'

'A long and a difficult journey to undertake. What was at the edge of the World that demanded such an effort, besides water?'

Longfoot's lip trembled. 'Nothing!' Glokta frowned, and nudged at the Navigator's big toe with the head of the hammer. 'It was not there! The thing that Bayaz sought! It was not there! He said he had been tricked!'

'What was it that he thought would be there?'

'He said it was a stone!'

'A stone?'

'The woman asked him. He said it was a rock . . . a rock from the Other Side.' The Navigator shook his sweating head. 'An unholy notion! I am glad we found no such thing. Bayaz called it the Seed!'

Glokta felt the grin melting from his face. *The Seed. Is it my imagination, or has the room grown colder?* 'What else did he say about it?'

'Just myths and nonsense!'

'Try me.'

'Stories, about Glustrod, and ruined Aulcus, and taking forms, and stealing faces! About speaking to devils, and the summoning of them. About the Other Side.'

'What else?' Glokta dealt Longfoot's toe a firmer tap with the hammer.

'Ah! Ah! He said the Seed was the stuff of the world below! That it was left over from before the Old Time, when demons walked the earth! He said it was a great and powerful weapon! That he meant to use it, against the Gurmish! Against the Prophet!' *A weapon, from before the Old Time. The summoning of devils, the taking of forms.* Kanedias seemed to frown down from the wall more grimly than ever, and Glokta flinched. He remembered his nightmare trip into the House of the Maker, the patterns of light on the floor, the shifting rings in the darkness. He remembered stepping out onto the roof, standing high above the city without climbing a single stair.

'You did not find it?' he whispered, his mouth dry.

'No! It was not there!'

'And then?'

'That was all! We came back across the mountains. We made a raft and rode the great Aes back to the sea. We took a ship from Calcis and I sit before you now!'

Glokta narrowed his eyes, studying carefully his prisoner's face. *There is more. I see it.* 'What are you not telling me?'

'I have told you everything! I have no talent for dissembling!' *That, at least, is true. His lies are plain.*

'If your contract is ended, why are you still in the city?'

'Because . . . because . . .' The Navigator's eyes darted round the room.

'Oh, dear me, no.' The heavy hammer came down with all of Glokta's crippled strength and crushed Longfoot's big toe flat with a dull thud. The Navigator gaped at it, eyes bulging from his head. *Ah, that beautiful, horrible moment between stubbing your toe and feeling the hurt. Here it comes. Here it comes. Here it—* Longfoot let vent a great shriek, squirmed around in his chair, face contorted with agony.

'I know the feeling,' said Glokta, wincing as he wriggled his own remaining toes around in his sweaty boot. 'I truly, truly do, and I sympathise. That blinding flash of pain, then up washes the sick and dizzy faintness of the shattered bone, then the slow pulsing up the leg that seems to drag the water from your eyes and make your whole body tremble.' Longfoot gasped, and whimpered, tears glistening on his cheeks. 'And what comes next? Weeks of limping? Months of hobbling, crippled? And if the next blow is to on your ankle?' Glokta prodded at Longfoot's shin with the end of the hammer. 'Or square on your kneecap, what then? Will you ever walk again? I know the feelings well, believe me.' *So how can I inflict them now, on someone else?* He

shrugged his twisted shoulders. *One of life's mysteries.* 'Another?' And he raised the hammer again.

'No! No! Wait!' wailed Longfoot. 'The priest! God help me, a priest came to the Order! A Gurkish priest! He said that one day the First of the Magi might ask for a Navigator, and that he wished to be told of it! That he wished to be told what happened afterward! He made threats, terrible threats, we had no choice but to obey! I was waiting in the city for another Navigator, who will convey the news! Only this morning I told him everything I have told you! I was about to leave Adua, I swear!'

'What was the name of this priest?' Longfoot said nothing, his wet eyes wide, the breath hissing in his nose. *Oh, why must they test me?* Glokta looked down at the Navigator's toe. It was already starting to swell and go blotchy, streaks of black blood-blisters down each side, the nail deep, brooding purple, edged with angry red. Glokta ground the end of the hammer's handle savagely into it. 'The name of the priest! His name! His name! His—'

'Aargh! Mamun! God help me! His name was Mamun!' *Mamun. Yulwei spoke of him, in Dagoska. The first apprentice of the Prophet himself. Together they broke the Second Law, together they ate the flesh of men.*

'Mamun. I see. Now.' Glokta craned further forward, ignoring an ugly tingling up his twisted spine. 'What is Bayaz doing here?'

Longfoot gaped, a long string of drool hanging from his bottom lip. 'I don't know!'

'What does he want with us? What does he want in the Union?'

'I don't know! I have told you everything!'

'Leaning forwards is a considerable ordeal for me. One that I begin to tire of.' Glokta frowned, and lifted the hammer, its polished head glinting.

'I just find ways from here to there! I only navigate! Please! No!' Longfoot squeezed his eyes shut, tongue wedged between his teeth. *Here it comes. Here it comes. Here it comes . . .*

Glokta tossed the hammer clattering down on the floor and leaned back, rocking his aching hips left and right to try and squeeze away the aches. 'Very well,' he sighed. 'I am satisfied.'

The prisoner opened first one grimacing eye, and then the other. He looked up, face full of hope. 'I can go?'

Severard chuckled softly behind his mask. Even Frost made a kind of hissing sound. 'Of course you can go.' Glokta smiled his empty smile. 'You can go back in your bag.'

The Navigator's face went slack with horror. 'God take pity on me.'

If there is a God, he has no pity in him.

Fortunes of War

Lord Marshal Burr was in the midst of writing a letter, but he smiled up as West let the tent flap drop. 'How are you, Colonel?'

'Well enough, thank you, sir. The preparations are well underway. We should be ready to leave at first light.'

'As efficient as ever. Where would I be without you?' Burr gestured at the decanter. 'Wine?'

'Thank you, sir.' West poured himself a glass. 'Would you care for one?'

Burr indicated a battered canteen at his elbow. 'I believe it would be prudent if I was to stick to water.'

West winced, guiltily. He hardly felt as if he had the right to ask, but there was no escaping it now. 'How are you feeling, sir?'

'Much better, thank you for asking. Much, much better.' He grimaced, put one fist over his mouth, and burped. 'Not entirely recovered, but well on the way.' As though to prove the point he got up easily from his chair and strode to the map, hands clasped behind his back. His face had indeed regained much of its colour. He no longer stood hunched over, wobbling as though he were about to fall.

'Lord Marshal . . . I wanted to speak to you . . . about the battle at Dunbrec.'

Burr looked round. 'About what feature of it?'

'When you were sick . . .' West teetered on the brink of speaking, then let the words bubble out. 'I didn't send for a surgeon! I could have, but—'

'I'm proud that you didn't.' West blinked. He had hardly dared to hope for that answer. 'You did what I would have wanted you to do. It is important that an officer should care, but it is vital that he should not care too much. He must be able to place his men in harm's way. He must be able to send them to their deaths, if he deems it necessary. He must be able to make sacrifices, and to weigh the greatest good, without emotion counting in his choice. That is why I like you, West. You have compassion in you, but you have iron too. One cannot be a great leader without a certain . . . ruthlessness.'

West found himself lost for words. The Lord Marshal chuckled, and slapped the table with his open hand. 'But as it happens, no harm done, eh? The line held, the Northmen were turned out of England, and I tottered through alive, as you can see!'

'I am truly glad to see you feeling better, sir.'

Burr grinned. 'Things are looking up. We are free to move again, with our lines of supply secure and the weather finally dry. If your Dogman's plan works then we have a chance of finishing Bethod within a couple of weeks! They've been a damn courageous and useful set of allies!'

'They have, sir.'

'But this trap must be carefully baited, and sprung at just the right moment.' Burr peered at the map, rocking energetically back and forward on his heels.

'If we're too early Bethod may slip away. If we're too late our Northern friends could be crushed before we can reach them. We have to make sure bloody Poulder and bloody Kroy don't drag their bloody feet!' He winced and put a hand on his stomach, reached for his canteen and took a swig of water.

'I'd say you finally have them house-trained, Lord Marshal.'

'Don't you believe it. They're only waiting for their chance to put the knife in me, the pair of them! And now the King is dead. Who knows who will replace him? Voting for a monarch! Have you ever heard of such a thing?'

West's mouth felt unpleasantly dry. It was almost impossible to believe that the whole business had been partly his own doing. It would hardly have done to take credit for it however, given that his part had been to murder the heir to the throne in cold blood. 'Who do you think they will choose, sir?' he croaked.

'I'm no courtier, West, for all I have a seat on the Closed Council. Brock, maybe, or Isher? I'll tell you one thing for sure – if you think there's violence going on up here, it'll be twice as brutal back home in Midderland, with half the mercy shown.' The Marshal burped, and swallowed, and laid a hand on his stomach. 'Gah. No Northman's anything like as ruthless as those vultures on the Closed Council when they get started. And what will change when they have their new man in his robes of state? Not much, I'm thinking. Not much.'

'Very likely, sir.'

'I daresay there's nothing that we can do about it either way. A pair of blunt soldiers, eh, West?' He stepped up close to the map again, and traced their route northwards towards the mountains, his thick forefinger hissing over the paper. 'We must make sure we are ready to move at sunup. Every hour could be vital. Poulder and Kroy have had their orders?'

'Signed and delivered, sir, and they understand the urgency. Don't worry, Lord Marshal, we'll be ready to go in the morning.'

'Don't worry?' Burr snorted. 'I'm the commander of his Majesty's army. Worrying is what I do. But you should get some rest.' He waved West out of the tent with one thick hand. 'I'll see you at first light.'

They played their cards by torchlight on the hillside, in the calm night under the stars, and by torchlight below them the Union army made its hurried preparations to advance. Lamps bobbed and moved, soldiers cursed in the darkness. Bangs, and clatters, and the ill-tempered calls of men and beasts floated through the still air.

'There'll be no sleep for anyone tonight.' Brint finished dealing and scraped up his cards with his fingernails.

'I wish I could remember the last time I got more than three good hours together,' said West. Back in Adua, most likely, before his sister came to the city. Before the Marshal put him on his staff. Before he came back to Angland, before he met Prince Ladisla, before the freezing journey north and the things he had done on it. He hunched his shoulders and frowned down at his dog-eared cards.

'How's the Lord Marshal?' asked Jalenhorm.

'Much better, I'm pleased to say.'

'Thank the fates for that,' Kaspas raised his brows. 'I don't much fancy the idea of that pedant Kroy in charge.'

'Or Poulter either,' said Brint. 'The man's ruthless as a snake.'

West could only agree. Poulter and Kroy hated him almost as much as they hated each other. If one of them took command he'd be lucky if he found himself swabbing latrines the following day. Probably he'd be on a boat to Adua within the week. To swab latrines there.

'Have you heard about Luthar?' asked Jalenhorn.

'What about him?'

'He's back in Adua.' West looked up sharply. Ardee was in Adua, and the idea of the two of them together again was not exactly a heartening thought.

'I had a letter from my cousin Ariss.' Kaspas squinted as he clumsily fanned out his cards. 'She says Jezal was far away somewhere, on some kind of mission for the king.'

'A mission?' West doubted anyone would have trusted Jezal with anything important enough to be called a mission.

'All of Adua is buzzing with it, apparently.'

'They say he led some charge or other,' said Jalenhorn, 'across some bridge.'

West raised his eyebrows. 'Did he now?'

'They say he killed a score of men on the battlefield.'

'Only a score?'

'They say he bedded the Emperor's daughter,' murmured Brint.

West snorted. 'Somehow I find that the most believable of the three.'

Kaspas spluttered with laughter. 'Well whatever the truth of it, he's been made up to Colonel.'

'Good for him,' muttered West, 'he always seems to fall on his feet, that boy.'

'Did you hear about this revolt?'

'My sister mentioned something about it in her last letter. Why?'

'There was a full-scale rebellion, Ariss tells me. Thousands of peasants, roaming the countryside, burning and looting, hanging anyone with a 'dan' in their name. Guess who was given command of the force sent to stop them?'

West sighed. 'Not our old friend Jezal dan Luthar, by any chance?'

'The very same, and he persuaded them to go back to their homes, how about that?'

'Jezal dan Luthar,' murmured Brint, 'with the common touch. Who could have thought it?'

'Not me.' Jalenhorn emptied his glass and poured himself another. 'But they're calling him a hero now, apparently.'

'Toasting him in the taverns,' said Brint.

'Congratulating him in the Open Council,' said Kaspas.

West scraped the jingling pile of coins towards him with the edge of his hand. 'I wish I could say I was surprised, but I always guessed I'd be taking my orders from Lord Marshal Luthar one of these days.' It could have been worse, he supposed. It could have been Poulter or Kroy.

The first pink glow of dawn was creeping across the tops of the hills as West walked up the slope towards the Lord Marshal's tent. It was past time to give the word to move. He saluted grimly to the guards beside the flap and pushed on through. One lamp was still burning in the corner beyond, casting a ruddy glow over the maps, over the folding chairs and the folding tables, filling the creases in the blankets on Burr's bed with black shadows. West crossed to it, thinking over all the tasks he had to get done that morning, checking that he had left nothing out.

'Lord Marshal, Poulder and Kroy are waiting for your word to move.' Burr lay upon his camp bed, his eyes closed, his mouth open, sleeping peacefully. West would have liked to leave him there, but time was already wasting. 'Lord Marshal!' he snapped, walking up close to the bed. Still he did not respond.

That was when West noticed that his chest was not moving.

He reached out with hesitant fingers and held them above Burr's open mouth. No warmth. No breath. West felt the horror slowly spreading out from his chest to the very tips of his fingers. There could be no doubt. Lord Marshal Burr was dead.

It was grey morning when the coffin was carried from the tent on the shoulders of six solemn guardsmen, the surgeon walking along behind with his hat in his hand. Poulder, Kroy, West, and a scattering of the army's most senior men lined the path to watch it go. Burr himself would no doubt have approved of the simple box in which his corpse would be shipped back to Adua. The same rough carpentry in which the Union's lowest levies were buried.

West stared at it, numb.

The man inside had been like a father to him, or the closest he had ever come to having one. A mentor and protector, a patron and a teacher. An actual father, rather than the bullying, drunken worm that nature had cursed him with. And yet he did not feel sorrow as he stared at that rough wooden box. He felt fear. For the army and for himself. His first instinct was not to weep, it was to run. But there was nowhere to run to. Every man had to do his part, now more than ever.

Kroy lifted his sharp chin and stood up iron rigid as the shadow of the casket passed across them. 'Marshal Burr will be much missed. He was a staunch soldier, and a brave leader.'

'A patriot,' chimed in Poulder, his lip trembling, one hand pressed against his chest as though it might burst open with emotion. 'A patriot who gave his life for his country! It was my honour to serve under his orders.'

West wanted to vomit at their hypocrisy, but the fact was he desperately needed them. The Dogman and his people were out in the hills, moving north, trying to lure Bethod into a trap. If the Union army did not follow, and soon, they would have no help when the King of the Northmen finally caught up to them. They would only succeed in luring themselves into their graves.

'A terrible loss,' said West, watching the coffin carried slowly down the hillside, 'but we will honour him best by fighting on.'

Kroy gave a regulation nod. 'Well said, Colonel. We will make these Northmen pay!'

‘We must. To that end, we should make ready to advance. We are already behind schedule, and the plan relies on precise—’

‘What?’ Poulder stared at him as though he suspected West of having gone suddenly insane. ‘Move forward? Without orders? Without a clear chain of command?’

Kroy gave vent to an explosive snort. ‘Impossible.’

Poulder violently shook his head. ‘Out of the question, entirely out of the question.’

‘But Marshal Burr’s orders were quite specific—’

‘Circumstances have very plainly altered.’ Kroy’s face was an expressionless slab. ‘Until I receive explicit instructions from the Closed Council, no one will be moving my division so much as a hair’s breadth.’

‘General Poulder, surely you—’

‘In this particular circumstance, I cannot but agree with General Kroy. The army cannot move an inch until the Open Council has selected a new king, and the king has appointed a new Lord Marshal.’ And he and Kroy eyed each other with the deepest hatred and distrust.

West stood stock still, his mouth hanging slightly open, unable to believe his ears. It would take days for news of Burr’s death to reach the Agriont, and even if the new king decided on a replacement immediately, days for the orders to come back. West pictured the long miles of forested track to Uffrith, the long leagues of salt water to Adua. A week, perhaps, if the decision was made at once, and with the government in chaos that hardly seemed likely.

In the meantime the army would sit there, doing nothing, the hills before them all but undefended, while Bethod was given ample time to march north, slaughter the Dogman and his friends, and return to his positions. Positions which, no doubt, untold numbers of their own men would be killed assaulting once the army finally had a new commander. All an utterly pointless, purposeless waste. Burr’s coffin had only just passed out of sight but already, it seemed, it was quite as if the man had never lived. West felt the horror creeping up his throat, threatening to strangle him with rage and frustration. ‘But the Dogman and his Northmen, our allies . . . they are counting on our help!’

‘Unfortunate,’ observed Kroy.

‘Regrettable,’ murmured Poulder, with a sharp intake of breath, ‘but you must understand, Colonel West, that the entire business is quite out of our hands.’

Kroy nodded stiffly. ‘Out of our hands. And that is all.’

West stared at the two of them, and a terrible wave of powerlessness swept over him. The same feeling that he had when Prince Ladisla decided to cross the river, when Prince Ladisla decided to order the charge. The same feeling that he had when he floundered up in the mist, blood in his eyes, and knew the day was lost. That feeling that he was nothing more than an observer. That feeling that he had promised himself he would never have again. His own fault, perhaps.

A man should only make such promises as he is sure he can keep.

The Kingmaker

It was a hot day outside, and sunlight poured in through the great stained-glass windows, throwing coloured patterns across the tiled floor of the Lords' Round. The great space usually felt airy and cool, even in the summer. Today it felt stuffy, suffocating, uncomfortably hot. Jezal tugged his sweaty collar back and forth, trying to let some breath of air into his uniform without moving from his attitude of stiff attention.

The last time he had stood in this spot, back to the curved wall, had been the day the Guild of Mercers was dissolved. It was hard to imagine that it was little more than a year ago, so much seemed to have happened since. He had thought then that the Lords' Round could not possibly have been more crowded, more tense, more excited. How wrong he had been.

The curved banks of benches that took up the majority of the chamber were crammed to bursting with the Union's most powerful noblemen, and the air was thick with their expectant, anxious, fearful whispering. The entire Open Council was in breathless attendance, wedged shoulder to fur-trimmed shoulder, each man with the glittering chain about his shoulders that marked him out in gold or silver as the head of his family. Jezal might have had little more understanding of politics than a mushroom, but even he had to be excited by the importance of the occasion. The selection of a new High King of the Union by open vote. He felt a flutter of nerves in his throat at the thought. As occasions went, it was difficult to imagine one bigger.

The people of Adua certainly knew it. Beyond the walls, in the streets and squares of the city, they were waiting eagerly for news of the Open Council's decision. Waiting to cheer their new monarch, or perhaps to jeer him, depending on the choice. Beyond the high doors of the Lords' Round, the Square of Marshals was a single swarming crowd, each man and woman in the Agriont desperate to be the first to hear word from inside. Futures would be decided, great debts would be settled, fortunes won and lost on the result. Only a lucky fraction had been permitted into the public gallery, but still enough that the spectators were crushed together around the balcony, in imminent danger of being shoved over and plunging to the tiled floor below.

The inlaid doors at the far end of the hall opened with a ringing crash, the echoes rebounding from the distant ceiling and booming around the great space. There was a rustling as every one of the councillors swivelled in his seat to look towards the entrance, and then a clatter of feet as the Closed Council approached steadily down the aisle between the benches. A gaggle of secretaries, and clerks, and hangers-on hurried after, papers and ledgers clutched in their eager hands. Lord Chamberlain Hoff strode at their head, frowning grimly. Behind him walked Sult, all in white, and Marovia, all in black, their faces equally solemn. Next came Varuz, and Halleck, and . . . Jezal's face fell. Who else but the First of the Magi, attired once again in his

outrageous wizard's mantle, his apprentice skulking at his elbow. Bayaz grinned as though he were doing nothing more than attending the theatre. Their eyes met, and the Magus had the gall to wink. Jezal was far from amused.

To a swelling chorus of mutterings, the old men took their high chairs behind a long, curved table, facing the noblemen on their banked benches. Their aides arranged themselves on smaller chairs and laid out their papers, opened their books, whispered to their masters in hushed voices. The tension in the hall rose yet another step towards outright hysteria.

Jezal felt a sweaty shiver run up his back. Glokta was there, beside the Arch Lector, and the familiar face was anything but a reassurance. Jezal had been at Ardee's house only that morning, and all night too. Needless to say, he had neither forsworn her nor proposed marriage. His head spun from going round and round the issue. The more time he spent with her, the more impossible any decision seemed to become.

Glokta's fever-bright eyes swivelled to his, held them, then flicked away. Jezal swallowed, with some difficulty. He had landed himself in a devil of a spot, alright. What ever was he to do?

Glokta gave Luthar one brief glare. *Just to remind him of where we stand.* Then he swivelled in his chair, grimacing as he stretched out his throbbing leg, pressing his tongue hard into his empty gums as he felt the knee click. *We have more important business than Jezal dan Luthar. Far more important business.*

For this one day, the power lies with the Open Council, not the Closed. With the nobles, not the bureaucrats. With the many, not the few. Glokta looked down the table, at the faces of the great men who had guided the course of the Union for the last dozen years and more: Sult, Hoff, Marovia, Varuz, and all the rest. Only one member of the Closed Council was smiling. *Its newest and least welcome addition.*

Bayaz sat in his tall chair, his only companion his pallid apprentice, Malacus Quai. *And he looks scant companionship for anyone.* The First of the Magi seemed to revel in the bowel-loosening tension as much as his fellows were horrified by it, his smile absurdly out of place among the frowns. Worried faces. Sweaty brows. Nervous whispers to their cronies. *They perch on razors, all of them. And I too, of course. Let us not forget poor Sand dan Glokta, faithful public servant! We cling to power by our fingernails – slipping, slipping. We sit like the accused, at our own trials. We know the verdict is about to come down. Will it be an ill-deserved reprieve?* Glokta felt a smile twitch the corner of his mouth. Or an altogether bloodier sentence? *What say the gentlemen of the jury?*

His eyes flickered over the faces of the Open Council on their benches. *Three hundred and twenty faces.* Glokta pictured the papers nailed to the Arch Lector's wall, and he matched them to the men sitting before him. *The secrets, the lies, and the allegiances. The allegiances most of all. Which way will they vote?*

He saw some whose support he had made certain of. Or as certain as we can be in these uncertain times. He saw Ingelstad's pink face among the press, near to the back, and the man swallowed and looked away. As long as you

vote our way, you can look where you like. He saw Wetterlant's slack features a few rows back, and the man gave him an almost imperceptible nod. *So our last offer was acceptable. Four more for the Arch lector? Enough to make the difference, and keep us in our jobs? To keep us all alive?* Glokta felt his empty grin widen. We shall soon see . . .

In the centre of the front row, among the oldest and best families of Midderland's nobility, Lord Brock sat, arms folded, with a look of hungry expectation. *Our front runner, keen to spring from the gate.* Not far from him was Lord Isher, old and stately. *The second favourite, still with every chance.* Barezin and Heugen sat nearby, wedged uncomfortably together and occasionally looking sideways at each other with some distaste. *Who knows? A late spurt and the throne could be theirs.* Lord Governor Skald sat on the far left, at the front of the delegations from Angland and Starikland. *New men, from the provinces. But a vote is still a vote, however we might turn our noses up.* Over on the far right twelve Aldermen of Westport sat, marked as outsiders by the cut of their clothes and the tone of their skin. *Yet a dozen votes still, and undeclared.*

There were no representatives of Dagoska today. *There are none left at all, alas. Lord Governor Vurms was relieved of his post. His son lost his head and could not attend. As for the rest of the city – it was conquered by the Gurkish. Well. Some wastage is inevitable. We will struggle on without them. The board is set, the pieces ready to be moved. Who will be the winner of this sordid little game, do we suppose? We shall soon see . . .*

The Announcer stepped forwards into the centre of the circular floor, lifted his staff high above his head and brought it down with a series of mighty crashes that echoed from the polished marble walls. The chatter faded, the magnates shuffled round to face the floor, every face drawn with tension. A pregnant silence settled over the packed hall, and Glokta felt a flurry of twitches slink up the left side of his face and set his eyelid blinking.

'I call this meeting of the Open Council of the Union to order!' thundered the Announcer. Slowly, and with the grimmest of frowns, Lord Hoff rose to face the councillors.

'My friends! My colleagues! My Lords of Midderland, Angland, and Starikland, Aldermen of Westport! Guslav the Fifth, our King . . . is dead. His two heirs . . . are dead. One at the hands of our enemies in the north, the other, our enemies in the south. Truly, this is a time of troubles, and we are left without a leader.' He held his arms up imploringly to the councillors. 'You are now faced with a grave responsibility. The selection, from among your number, of a new High King of the Union. Any man who holds a chair on this Open Council is a potential candidate! Any of you . . . could be our next King.' A volley of near-hysterical whispers floated down from the public gallery, and Hoff was obliged to raise his voice to shout over them.

'Such a vote has only been taken once before in the long history of our great nation! After the civil war and the fall of Morlic the Mad, when Arnault was raised to the throne by near-unanimous accord. He it was who sired the great dynasty that lasted until a few short days ago.' He let fall his arms and stared sadly down at the tiles. 'Wise was the choice your forebears made that day. We can only hope that the man elected here this morning, by and in full view

of his peers, will found a dynasty just as noble, just as strong, just as even-handed, and just as long-lived!

We can only hope for someone who will do as he's damn well told.

Ferro shoved a woman in a long gown out of her way. She elbowed past a fat man, his jowls trembling with outrage. She forced her way through to the balcony and glared down. The wide chamber below was crammed with fur-trimmed old men, crowded together on high banks of seating, each with a sparkling chain round his shoulders and a sparkling sheen of sweat across his pale face. Opposite them, behind a curved table, were another set of men, fewer in number. She scowled as she saw Bayaz sitting at one end of them, smiling as if he knew some secret that no one else could guess.

Just like always.

Beside him stood a fat pink with a face full of broken veins, shouting something about each man voting with his conscience. Ferro snorted. She would have been surprised if the few hundred men down there had five whole consciences between them. It seemed as if they were all attending carefully to the fat man's address, but Ferro saw differently.

The room was full of signals.

Men glanced sideways at one another and gave subtle nods. They winked with one eye or the other. They touched forefingers to noses and ears. They scratched in strange ways. A web of secrets, spreading out to every part of the chamber, and with Bayaz sitting grinning in the midst of it. Some way behind him, with his back to the wall, Jezal dan Luthar was standing in a uniform festooned with shiny thread. Ferro curled her lip. She could see it in the way he stood.

He had learned nothing.

The Announcer stabbed at the floor with his stick again. 'Voting will now begin!' There was a ragged groan and Ferro saw the woman she had pushed past earlier slide to the floor in a faint. Someone dragged her away, flapping a piece of paper in her face, and the ill-tempered press closed in tight behind. 'In the first round the field will be narrowed to three choices! There will be a show of hands for each candidate in order of the most extensive lands and holdings!'

Down below on their benches, the richly dressed sweated and trembled like men before a battle.

'Firstly!' shrieked a clerk, voice cracking as he consulted an enormous ledger, 'Lord Brock!'

Up in the gallery people mopped their faces, muttering and gasping as if they were facing death. Perhaps some of them were. The whole place reeked of doubt, and excitement, and terror. So strong it was contagious. So strong that even Ferro, who did not care a shit for the pinks and their damn vote, felt her mouth dry, her fingers itching, her heart thumping fast.

The Announcer turned to face the chamber. 'The first candidate will be Lord Brock! All those members of the Open Council who wish to vote for Lord Brock as the next High King of the Union, will you please raise your—'

‘One moment, my Lords!’

Glokta jerked his head round, but his neck-bones stuck halfway and he had to peer from the corner of one dewy eye. He need hardly have bothered. I could have guessed without looking who spoke. Bayaz had risen from his chair and was now smiling indulgently towards the Open Council. With perfect timing. A volley of outraged calls rose up from its members in response.

‘This is no time for interruptions!’

‘Lord Brock! I vote for Brock!’

‘A new dynasty!’

Bayaz’ smile did not slip a hair’s breadth. ‘But what if the old dynasty could continue? What if we could make a new beginning,’ and he glanced significantly across the faces of his colleagues on the Closed Council, ‘while keeping all that is good in our present government? What if there was a way to heal wounds, rather than to cause them?’

‘How?’ came the mocking calls.

‘What way?’

Bayaz’ smile grew broader yet, ‘Why, a royal bastard.’

There was a collective gasp. Lord Brock bounced from his seat. Quite as if he had a spring under his arse. ‘This is an insult to this house! A scandal! A slur on the memory of King Guslav!’ Indeed, he now seems not only a drooling vegetable, but a lecherous one. Other councillors rose to join him, faces red with outrage, white with fury, shaking fists and making angry calls. The whole sweep of benches seemed to honk and grunt and wriggle. *Just like the pig pens at the slaughterhouse, clamouring for any swill on offer.*

‘Wait!’ shrieked the Arch Lector, his white-gloved hands raised in entreaty. Sensing some faint glimmer of hope in the darkness, perhaps? ‘Wait, my Lords! There is nothing to be lost by listening! We shall have the truth here, even if it is painful! The truth should be our only concern!’ Glokta had to chomp his gums down on a splutter of laughter. *Oh, of course, your Eminence! The truth has ever been your only care!*

But the babble gradually subsided. Those councillors who were on their feet were shamed back into line. *Their habit of obedience to the Closed Council is not easily broken. But then habits never are. Especially of obedience. Only ask my mother’s dogs.* They grumbled their way back into their seats, and allowed Bayaz to continue.

‘Your Lordships have perhaps heard of Carmee dan Roth?’ A swell of noise from the gallery above confirmed that the name was not unfamiliar. ‘She was a great favourite with the King, when he was younger. A very great favourite. So much so that she became pregnant with a child.’ Another wave of muttering, louder. ‘I have always carried a sentimental regard for the Union. I have always had one eye on its welfare, despite the scant thanks I have received for it.’ And Bayaz gave the very briefest curl of his lip towards the members of the Closed Council. ‘So, when the lady died in childbirth, I took the King’s bastard into my care. I placed him with a noble family, to be well raised and well educated, in case the nation should one day find itself without

an heir. My actions now seem prudent indeed.'

'Lies!' someone shrieked. 'Lies!' But few voices joined in. Their tone instead was one of curiosity.

'A natural son?'

'A bastard?'

'Carmee dan Roth, did he say?'

They have heard this tale before. Rumours, perhaps, but familiar ones. Familiar enough to make them listen. To make them judge whether it will be in their interests to believe.

But Lord Brock was not convinced. 'A blatant fabrication! It will take more than rumour and conjecture to sway this house! Produce this bastard, if you can, so-called First of the Magi! Work your magic!'

'No magic is needful,' sneered Bayaz. 'The King's son is already with us in the chamber.' Gasps of consternation from the gallery, sighs of amazement from the councillors, stunned silence from the Closed Council and their aides, every eye fixed on Bayaz' pointing finger as he swept out his hand towards the wall. 'No other man than Colonel Jezal dan Luthar!'

The spasm began in Glokta's toeless foot, shot up his ruined leg, set his twisted spine shivering from his arse right to his skull, made his face twitch like an angry jelly, made his few teeth rattle in his empty gums, set his eyelid flickering fast as a fly's wings.

The echoes of Bayaz' last utterance whispered round the suddenly silent hall. 'Luthar, Luthar, Luthar . . .'

You must be fucking joking.

The pale faces of the councillors were frozen, hanging in wide-eyed shock, squashed up in narrow-eyed rage. The pale men behind the table gaped. The pale people at the balcony pressed their hands over their mouths. Jezal dan Luthar, who had wept with self-pity while Ferro had stitched his face. Jezal dan Luthar, that leaky piss-pot of selfishness, and arrogance, and vanity. Jezal dan Luthar, who she had called the princess of the Union, had a chance of ending the day as its King.

Ferro could not help herself.

She let her head drop back and she hacked, and coughed, and gurgled with amusement. Tears sprung up in her eyes, her chest shook and her knees trembled. She clung to the rail of the balcony, she gasped, blubbered, drooled. Ferro did not laugh often. She could scarcely remember the last time. But Jezal dan Luthar, a King?

This was funny.

High above, in the public gallery, someone had started laughing. A jagged cackling completely inappropriate to the solemnity of the moment. But Jezal's first impulse, when he realised that it was his name that Bayaz had called out, when he realised that it was him the outstretched finger was pointing to, was to join in. His second, as every face in the entire vast space turned instantly

towards him, was to vomit. The result was an ungainly cough, a shame-faced grin, an unpleasant burning at the very back of the mouth, and an instant paling of the complexion.

'I . . .' he found himself croaking, but without the slightest idea of how he would continue his sentence. What words could possibly help at a time like this? All he could do was stand there, sweating profusely, trembling under his stiff uniform, as Bayaz continued in ringing tones, his voice cutting over the laughter bubbling down from above.

'I have the sworn statement of his adoptive father here, attesting that all I say is true, but does it matter? The truth of it is plain for any man to see!' His arm shot out towards Jezal again. 'He won a Contest before you all, and accompanied me on a journey full of peril with never a complaint! He charged the bridge at Darmium, without a thought for his own safety! He saved Adua from the revolt without a drop of blood spilled! His valour and his prowess, his wisdom and his selflessness are well known to all! Can it be doubted that the blood of kings flows in his veins?'

Jezal blinked. Odd facts began to bob to the surface of his sluggish mind. He was not much like his brothers. His father had always treated him differently. He had got all the looks in the family. His mouth was hanging open, but he found he could not close it. When his father had seen Bayaz, at the Contest, he had turned white as milk, as though he recognised him.

He had done, and he was not Jezal's father at all.

When the king had congratulated Jezal on his victory, he had mistaken him for his own son. Not such blinding folly, evidently, as everyone might have thought. The old fool had been closer to the mark than anyone. Suddenly, it all made horrible sense.

He was a bastard. Literally.

He was the natural son of a king. What was much more, he was slowly and with increasing terror beginning to realise, he was now being seriously considered as his replacement.

'My Lords!' shouted Bayaz over the disbelieving chatter gaining steadily in volume with every passing moment. 'You sit amazed! It is a difficult fact to accept, I can understand. Especially with the suffocating heat in here!' He signalled to the guards at both ends of the hall. 'Open the gates, please, and let us have some air!'

The doors were heaved open and a gentle breeze washed into the Lords' Round. A cooling breeze, and something else with it. Hard to make out at first, and then coming more clearly. Something like the noise of the crowd at the Contest. Soft, repetitive, and more than a little frightening.

'Luthar! Luthar! Luthar!' The sound of his own name, chanted over and over from a multitude of throats beyond the walls of the Agriont, was unmistakable.

Bayaz grinned. 'It would seem that the people of the city have already chosen their favoured candidate.'

'This is not their choice!' roared Brock, still on his feet but only now regaining his composure. 'Any more than it is yours!'

'But it would be foolish to ignore their opinion. The support of the commoners cannot be lightly dismissed, especially in these restless times. If

they were to be disappointed, in their current mood, who knows what might occur? Riots in the streets, or worse? None of us wants that, surely, Lord Brock?’

Several of the councillors shifted nervously on their benches, glancing towards the open doors, whispering to their neighbours. If the atmosphere in the Round had been confused before, it was flabbergasted now. But the worry and surprise of the Open Council was nothing compared to Jezal’s own.

A fascinating tale, but if he supposes that the Union’s greediest men will simply take his word for it and give the crown away he has made a staggering blunder, whether commoners wet themselves at the name of Luthar or not. Lord Isher rose from the front row for the first time, stately and magnificent, the jewels on his chain of office flashing. And so the furious objections, the outraged denials, the demands for punishment begin.

‘I wholeheartedly believe!’ called Isher in ringing tones, ‘that the man known as Colonel Jezal dan Luthar is none other than the natural child of the recently deceased King Guslav the Fifth!’ Glokta gawped. So, it seemed, did almost everyone else in the chamber. ‘And that he is further fitted for rule on account of his exemplary character and extensive achievements, both within the Union and outside it!’ Another peal of ugly laughter gurgled down from above, but Isher ignored it. ‘My vote, and the votes of my supporters, are wholeheartedly for Luthar!’

If Luthar’s eyes had gone any wider they might have dropped from his skull. And who can blame him? Now one of the Westport delegation was on his feet. ‘The Aldermen of Westport vote as one man for Luthar!’ he sang out in his Styrian accent. ‘Natural son and heir to King Guslav the Fifth!’

A man jumped up a few rows back. He glanced quickly and somewhat nervously at Glokta. None other than Lord Ingelstad. *The lying little shit, what’s he about?* ‘I am for Luthar!’ he shrieked.

‘And I, for Luthar!’ Wetterlant, his hooded eyes giving away no more emotion than they had when he fed the ducks. *Better offers, eh, gentlemen? Or better threats?* Glokta glanced at Bayaz. He had a faint smile on his face as he watched others spring from their benches to declare their support for the so-called natural son of Guslav the Fifth. Meanwhile, the chanting of the crowds out in the city could still be heard.

‘Luthar! Luthar! Luthar!’

As the shock drained away, Glokta’s mind began to turn. So that is *why our First of the Magi cheated in the Contest on Luthar’s behalf. That is why he has kept him close, all this time. That is why he procured for him so notable a command. If he had presented some nobody as the King’s son, he would have been laughed from the chamber. But Luthar, love him or hate him, is one of us. He is known, he is familiar, he is . . . acceptable.* Glokta looked at Bayaz with something close to admiration. *Pieces of a puzzle, patient years in the preparation, calmly slotted into place before our disbelieving eyes. And not a thing that we can do, except, perhaps, to dance along to his tune?*

Sult leaned sideways in his chair and hissed urgently in Glokta’s ear. ‘This

boy, Luthar, what manner of a man is he?’

Glokta frowned over at him, standing dumbstruck by the wall. He looked at that moment as if he could scarcely be trusted to control his own bowels, let alone a country. *Still, you could have said much the same for our previous King, and he discharged his duties admirably. His duties of sitting and drooling, while we ran the country for him.* ‘Before his trip abroad, your Eminence, he was as empty-headed, spineless and vain a young fool as one might hope to find in the entire nation. The last time I spoke to him, though—’

‘Perfect!’

‘But, your Eminence, you must see that this is all according to Bayaz’ plans—’

‘We will deal with that old fool later. I am taking advice.’ Sult turned to hiss at Marovia without waiting for a reply. Now the two old men looked out at the Open Council, now they gave their nods and their signals to the men they controlled. All the while, Bayaz smiled. *The way an engineer might smile as his new machine works for the first time, precisely according to his design.* The Magus caught Glokta’s eye, and gave the faintest of nods. There was nothing for Glokta to do but shrug, and give a toothless grin of his own. *I wonder if the time may come when we all wish we had voted for Brock.*

Now Marovia was speaking hurriedly to Hoff. The Lord Chamberlain frowned, nodded, turned towards the house and signalled to the Announcer, who beat furiously on the floor for silence.

‘My Lords of the Open Council!’ Hoff roared, once something resembling quiet had been established. ‘The discovery of a natural son plainly changes the complexion of this debate! Fate would appear to have gifted us the opportunity to continue the dynasty of Arnault without further doubt or conflict!’ *Fate gifts us? I rather think we have a less disinterested benefactor.* ‘In view of these exceptional circumstances, and the strong support already voiced by members of this house, the Closed Council judges that an exceptional vote should now be taken. A single vote, on whether the man previously known as Jezal dan Luthar should be declared High King of the Union forthwith!’

‘No!’ roared Brock, veins bulging from his neck. ‘I strongly protest!’ But he might as well have protested against the incoming tide. The arms were already shooting up in daunting numbers. The Aldermen of Westport, the supporters of Lord Isher, the votes that Sult and Marovia had bullied and bribed their way. Glokta saw many more, now, men he had thought undecided, or firmly declared for one man or another. *All lending their support to Luthar with a speed that strongly implies a previous arrangement.* Bayaz sat back, arms folded, as he watched the hands shoot skywards. It was already becoming terribly clear that over half of the room was in favour.

‘Yes!’ hissed the Arch Lector, a smile of triumph on his face. ‘Yes!’

Those who had not raised their arms, men committed to Brock, or Barezin, or Heugen, stared about them, stunned and not a little horrified at how quickly the world seemed to have passed them by. *How quickly the chance at power has slipped through their fingers. And who can blame them? It has been a surprising day for us all.*

Lord Brock made one last effort, raising a finger to stab at Luthar, still

goggling by the wall. 'What proof have you that he is the son of anyone in particular, beside the word of this old liar?' and he gestured at Bayaz. 'What proof, my Lords? I demand proof!'

Angry mutterings swept up and down the benches, but no one made themselves conspicuous. *The second time Lord Brock has stood before this Council and demanded proof, and the second time no one has cared. What proof could there be, after all? A birthmark on Luthar's arse in the shape of a crown? Proof is boring. Proof is tiresome. Proof is an irrelevance. People would far rather be handed an easy lie than search for a difficult truth, especially if it suits their own purposes. And most of us would far rather have a King with no friends and no enemies, than a King with plenty of both. Most of us would rather have things stay as they are, than risk an uncertain future.*

More hands were raised, and more. Luthar's support had rolled too far for any one man to stop it. *Now it is like a great boulder hurtling down a slope. They dare not stand in its way in case they are squashed to gravy. So they crowd in behind, and add their own weight to it, and hope to snatch the scraps up afterward.*

Brock turned, a deadly frown across his face, and he stormed down the aisle and out of the chamber. Probably he had hoped that a good part of the Open Council would storm out with him. *But in that, as in so much else today, he must be harshly disappointed.* No more than a dozen of his most loyal followers accompanied him on the lonely march out of the Lords' Round. The others have better sense. Lord Isher exchanged a long look with Bayaz, then raised his pale hand. Lords Barezin and Heugen watched the best part of their support flocking to the cause of the young pretender, glanced at each other, retreated back into their seats and stayed carefully silent. Skald opened his mouth to call out, looked about him, thought better of it, and with evident reluctance, slowly lifted his arm.

There were no further protests.

King Jezal the First was raised to the throne by near-unanimous accord.

The Trap

Coming up into the High Places again, and the air felt crisp and clear, sharp and familiar in Logen's throat. Their march had begun gently as they came up through the woods, a rise you'd hardly notice. Then the trees thinned out and their path took them up a valley between grassy fells, cracked with trickling streams, patched with sedge and gorse. Now the valley had narrowed to a gorge, hemmed in on both sides with slopes of bare rock and crumbling scree, getting always steeper. Above them, on either side of that gorge, two great crags rose up. Beyond, the hazy hints of mountain peaks – grey, and light grey, and even lighter grey, melted in the distance into the heavy grey sky.

The sun was out, and meaning business, and it was hot to walk in, bright to squint into. They were all weary from climbing, and worrying, and looking behind them for Bethod. Four hundred Carls, maybe, and as many painted-face hillmen, all spread out in a great long column, cursing and spitting, boots crunching and sliding in the dry dirt and the loose stones. Crummock's daughter was struggling up ahead of Logen, bent double under the weight of her father's hammer, hair round her face dark with sweat. Logen's own daughter would have been older than that, by now. If she hadn't been killed by the Shanka, along with her mother and her brothers. That thought gave Logen a hollow, guilty feeling. A bad one.

'You want a hand with that mallet, girl?'

'No I fucking don't!' she screamed at him, then dropped it off her shoulder and dragged it away up the slope by the handle, scowling at him all the way, the hammer's head clattering along and leaving a groove in the stony soil. Logen blinked after her. Seemed his touch with the women went all the way down to ones ten years old.

Crummock came up behind him, fingerbones swinging round his neck. 'Fierce, ah? Y'ave to be fierce, to get on in my family!' He leaned close and gave a wink. 'And she's the fiercest of the lot, that little bitch. If I'm honest, she's my favourite.' He shook his head as he watched her dragging at that hammer. 'She'll make some poor bastard one hell of a wife one day. We're here, in case you were wondering.'

'Eh?' Logen wiped sweat from his face, frowning as he stared about. 'Where's the—'

Then he realised. Crummock's fortress, if you could call it that, was right ahead of them.

The valley was no more than a hundred strides now from one cliff to the other, and a wall was built across it. An ancient and crumbling wall of rough blocks, so full of cracks, so coated with creeper, brambles, seeding grass, that it seemed almost part of the mountains. It wasn't a whole lot steeper than the valley itself, and as tall as three men on each other's shoulders at its highest, sagging here and there as if it was about to fall down on its own. In the centre

was a gate of weathered grey planks, splattered with lichen, managing to seem rotten and dried-out both at once.

To one side of the wall there was a tower, built up against the cliff. Or at least there was a great natural pillar sticking out from the rock with half-cut chunks of stone mortared to the top, making a wide platform on the cliff-side, overlooking the wall from high above. Logen looked at the Dogman as he trudged up, and the Dogman squinted at that wall as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

'This is it?' growled Dow, coming up next to them, his lip curling. A few trees had taken root at one side, just under the tower, must have been fifty years ago at least. Now they loomed up over the wall. A man could have climbed them easily, and stepped inside the place without even stretching far.

Tul stared up at the ragged excuse for a fortress. 'A strong place in the mountains, you said.'

'Strong . . . ish.' Crummock waved his hand. 'We hillmen have never been much for building and so on. What were you expecting? Ten marble towers and a hall bigger'n Skarling's?'

'I was expecting a halfway decent wall, at least,' growled Dow.

'Bah! Walls? I heard you were cold as snow and hot as piss, Black Dow, and now you want walls to hide behind?'

'We'll be outnumbered ten to one if Bethod does turn up, you mad fuck! You're damn right I want a wall, and you told us there'd be one!'

'But you said it yourself friend.' Crummock spoke soft and slow as though he was explaining it to a child, and he tapped at the side of his head with one thick finger. 'I'm mad! Mad as a sack of owls, and everyone says so! I can't remember the names of my own children. Who knows what I think a wall looks like? I hardly know what I'm talking of myself, most of the time, and you're fool enough to listen to me? You must be mad yourselves!'

Logen rubbed at the bridge of his nose and he gave a groan. The Dogman's Carls were gathering near them now, looking up at that mossy heap of stones and muttering to each other, far from happy. Logen could hardly blame them. It was a long, hot walk they'd had to find this at the end of it. But they had no choices, as far as he could see. 'It's a bit late to build a better one,' he grumbled. 'We'll have to do what we can with what we've got.'

'That's it Bloody-Nine, you need no wall and you know it!' Crummock clapped Logen on the arm with his great fat hand. 'You cannot die! You're beloved of the moon, my fine new friend, above all others! You cannot die, not with the moon looking over you! You cannot—'

'Shut up,' said Logen.

They crunched sourly across the slope towards the gate. Crummock called out and the old doors wobbled open. A pair of suspicious hillmen stood on the other side, watching them come in. They slogged up a steep ramp cut into the rock, all tired and grumbling, and came out into a flat space above. A saddle between the two crags, might have been a hundred strides wide and two hundred long, sheer cliffs of stone all round. There were a few wooden shacks and sheds scattered about the edges, all green with old moss, a slumping stone hall built against the rock face with smoke rising out of a squat chimney. Just next to it a narrow stair was cut into the cliff, climbing up to the platform at

the top of the tower.

'Nowhere to run to,' Logen muttered, 'if things turn sour.'

Crummock only grinned the wider. 'Course not. That's the whole point, ain't it? Bethod'll think he's got us like beetles in a bottle.'

'He will have,' growled the Dogman.

'Aye, but then your friends will come up behind him and won't he get the father of all shocks, though? It'll almost be worth it for the look on his face, the shit-eating bastard!'

Logen worked his mouth and spat onto the stony ground. 'I wonder what the looks on our faces'll be by then? All slack and corpse-like would be my guess.' A herd of shaggy sheep were pressed in tight together in a pen, staring around wide-eyed, bleating to each other. Hemmed in and helpless, and Logen knew exactly how they felt. From inside the fort, where the ground was a good deal higher, there was hardly a wall at all. You could've stepped up onto its walkway, if you'd got long legs, and stood at its crumbling, moss-ridden excuse for a parapet.

'Don't you worry your beautiful self about nothing, Bloody-Nine,' laughed Crummock. 'My fortress could be better built, I'll grant you, but the ground is with us, and the mountains, and the moon, all smiling on our bold endeavour. This is a strong place, with a strong history. Do you not know the story of Laffa the Brave?'

'Can't say that I do.' Logen wasn't altogether sure he wanted to hear it now, but he was in the long habit of not getting what he wanted.

'Laffa was a great bandit chief of the hillmen, a long time ago. He raided all the clans around for years, him and his brothers. One hot summer the clans had enough, so they banded together and hunted him in the mountains. Here's where he made his last stand. Right here in this fortress. Laffa and his brothers and all his people.'

'What happened?' asked Dogman.

'They all got killed, and their heads cut off and put in a sack, and the sack was buried in the pit they used to shit in.' Crummock beamed. 'Guess that's why they call it a last stand, eh?'

'That's it? That's the story?'

'That's all of it that I know, but I'm not right sure what else there could be. That was pretty much the end for Laffa, I'd say.'

'Thanks for the encouragement.'

'That's alright, that's alright! I've more stories, if you need more!'

'No, no, that's enough for me.' Logen turned and started walking off, the Dogman beside him. 'You can tell me more once we've won!'

'Ha ha, Bloody-Nine!' shouted Crummock after him, 'that'll be a story in itself, eh? You can't fool me! You're like I am, beloved of the moon! We fight hardest when our backs are to the mountains and there's no way out! Tell me it ain't so! We love it when we got no choices!'

'Oh aye,' Logen muttered to himself as he stalked off towards the gate. 'There's nothing better than no choices.'

Dogman stood at the foot o' the wall, staring up at it, and wondering what to do to give him and the rest a better chance at living out the week.

'It'd be a good thing to get all this creeper and grass cleared off it,' he said. 'Makes it a damn sight easier to climb.'

Tul raised an eyebrow. 'You sure it ain't all that plant that's holding it together?'

Grim tugged at a vine and a shower of dried-out mortar came with it.

'Might be you're right.' Dogman sighed. 'Cut off what we can, then, eh? Some work at the top would be time well spent and all. Be nice to have a decent stack o' stones to hide behind when Bethod starts shooting arrows at us.'

'That it would,' said Tul. 'And we could dig us a ditch down here in front, plant some stakes round the bottom, make it harder for 'em to get up close.'

'Then close that gate, nail it shut, and wedge a load of rocks in behind it.'

'We'll have trouble getting out,' said Tul.

Logen snorted. 'Us getting out won't be the pressing problem, I'm thinking.'

'You've a point right there,' laughed Crummock, ambling up with a lit pipe in his fat fist. 'It's Bethod's boys getting in that we should worry on.'

'Getting these walls patched up would be a good start at settling my mind.' Dogman pointed at the trees grown up over the wall. 'We need to get these cut down and cut up, carve us out some stone, mix us some mortar and all the rest. Crummock, you got people can do that? You got tools?'

He puffed at his pipe, frowning at Dogman all the long while, then blew brown smoke. 'I might have, but I won't take my orders from such as you, Dogman. The moon knows my talents, and they're for murder, not mortaring.' Grim rolled his eyes.

'Who will you take orders from?' asked Logen.

'I'll take 'em from you, Bloody-Nine, and from no other! The moon loves you, and I love the moon, and you're the man for—'

'Then get your people together and get to fucking cutting wood and stone. I'm bored o' your blather.'

Crummock knocked out his ashes sourly against the wall. 'You're no fun at all, you boys, you do nothing but worry. You need to think on the sunny side o' this. The worst that can happen is that Bethod don't show!'

'The worst?' Dogman stared at him. 'You sure? What about if Bethod does come, and his Carls kick your wall over like a pile o' turds and kill every last one of us?'

Crummock's brow furrowed. He frowned down at the ground. He squinted up at the clouds. 'True,' he said, breaking out in a smile. 'That is worse. You got a fast mind, lad.'

Dogman gave a long sigh, and stared down into the valley. The wall might not have been all they'd hoped for, but you couldn't knock the position. Coming up that steep slope against a set of hard men, high above and with nothing to lose, ready and more'n able to kill you. That was no one's idea o' fun.

'Tough to get organised down there,' said Logen, speaking Dogman's own thoughts. 'Specially with arrows plunging on you from above and nothing to hide behind. Hard to make numbers count. I wouldn't much fancy trying it

myself. How are we going to work it, if they come?’

‘I reckon we’ll make three crews.’ Dogman nodded to the tower. ‘Me up there with five score or so o’ the best archers. Good spot to shoot from, that. Nice and high, and a good view of the front o’ the wall.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim.

‘Maybe some strong lads to throw a rock or two.’

‘I’ll lob a rock,’ said Tul.

‘Fair enough. Then the pick of our lads up on the wall, ready to take ’em on hand to hand, if they get up there. That’ll be your crew, I reckon, Logen. Dow and Shivers and Red Hat can be your seconds.’

Logen nodded, not looking all that happy. ‘Aye, alright.’

‘Then Crummock up behind with his hillmen, ready to charge if they make it through the gate. If we last more’n a day, maybe you can swap over. Hillmen on the wall, Logen and the rest behind.’

‘That’s quite the plan for a little man!’ Crummock clapped him on the shoulder with a huge hand and damn near knocked him on his face. ‘Like as not you had it from the moon while you slept! Ain’t one thing in it I’d change!’ He slapped his meaty fist into his palm. ‘I love a good charge! I hope the Southerners don’t come, and leave more for the rest of us! I want to charge now!’

‘Good for you,’ grunted Dogman. ‘Maybe we can find you a cliff to charge off.’ He squinted into the sun, taking another look up at the wall that held all of their hopes. He wouldn’t have cared to try and climb it, not from this side, but it wasn’t halfway as high, or as thick, or as strong as he’d have liked. You don’t always get things the way you like, Threetrees would have said. But just once would’ve been nice.

‘The trap is ready,’ said Crummock, grinning down into the valley.

The Dogman nodded. ‘The only question is who’ll get caught in it. Bethod? Or us?’

Logen walked through the night, between the fires. Some fires had Carls round them, drinking Crummock’s beer, and smoking his chagga, and laughing at stories. Others had hillmen, looking like wolves in the shifting light with their rough furs, their tangled hair, their half-painted faces. One was singing, somewhere. Strange songs in a strange tongue that yapped and warbled like the animals in the forest, rose and fell like the valleys and the peaks. Logen had to admit he’d been smoking, for the first time in a while, and drinking too. Everything felt warm. The fires, and the men, and the cool wind, even. He wove his way through the dark, looking for the fire where the Dogman and the rest were sitting, and not having a clue which way to find it. He was lost, and in more ways than one.

‘How many men you killed, Da?’ Had to be Crummock’s daughter. There weren’t too many high voices round that camp, more was the pity. Logen saw the hillman’s great shape in the darkness, his three children sitting near him, their outsize weapons propped up in easy reach.

‘Oh, I’ve killed a legion of ’em, Isern.’ Crummock’s great deep voice rumbled

out at Logen as he came closer. 'More'n I can remember. Your father might not have all his wits all the time, but he's a bad enemy to have. One of the worst. You'll see the truth of that close up, when Bethod and his arse-lickers come calling.' He looked up and saw Logen coming through the night. 'I swear, and I don't doubt Bethod would swear with me, there's only one bastard in all the North who's nastier, and bloodier, and harder than your father.'

'Who's that?' asked the boy with the shield. Logen felt his heart sinking as Crummock's arm lifted up to point towards him.

'Why, that's him there. The Bloody-Nine.'

The girl glared at Logen. 'He's nothing. You could have him, Da!'

'By the dead, not me! Don't even say it girl, in case I make a pisspuddle big enough to drown you in.'

'He don't look like much.'

'And there's a lesson for all three of you. Not looking much, not saying much, not seeming much, that's a good first step in being dangerous, eh, Ninefingers? Then when you let the devil go free it's twice the shock for whatever poor bastard's on the end of it. Shock and surprise, my little beauties, and quickness to strike, and lack of pity. These are the things that make a killer. Size, and strength, and a big loud voice are alright in their place, but they're nothing to that murderous, monstrous, merciless speed, eh, Bloody-Nine?'

It was a hard lesson for children, but Logen's father had taught it to him young, and he'd kept it in mind all these years. 'It's a sorry fact. He who strikes first often strikes last.'

'That he does!' shouted Crummock, slapping his great thigh. 'Well said! But it's a happy fact, not a sorry one. You remember old Wilum, don't you, my children?'

'Thunder got him!' shouted the boy with the shield, 'in a storm, up in the High Places!'

'That it did! One moment he's standing there, the next there's a noise like the world falling and a flash like the sun, and Wilum's dead as my boots!'

'His feet was on fire!' laughed the girl.

'That they were, Isern. You saw how fast he died, how much the shock, how little the mercy that the lightning showed, well.' And Crummock's eyes slid across to Logen. 'That's what it'd be to cross that man there. One moment you'd say your hard word, the next?' He clapped his hands together with a crack and made the three children jump. 'He'd send you back to the mud. Faster than the sky killed Wilum, and with no more regret. Your life hangs on a thread, every moment you stand within two strides of that nothing-looking bastard there, does it not, Bloody-Nine?'

'Well . . .' Logen wasn't much enjoying this.

'How many men you killed then?' the girl shouted at him, sticking her chin out.

Crummock laughed and rubbed his hand in her hair. 'The numbers aren't made to count that high, Isern! He's the king of killers! No man made more deadly, not anywhere under the moon.'

'What about that Feared?' asked the boy with the spear.

'Ohhhhhh,' cooed Crummock, smiling right across his face. 'He's not a man,

Scofen. He's something else. But I wonder. Fenris the Feared and the Bloody-Nine, setting to kill one another?' He rubbed his hands together. 'Now that is a thing I would like to see. That is a thing the moon would love to shine upon.' His eyes rolled up towards the sky and Logen followed them with his own. The moon was up there, sitting in the black heavens, big and white, glowing like new fire.

Horrible Old Men

The tall windows stood open, allowing a merciful breeze to wash through the wide salon, to give the occasional cooling kiss to Jezal's sweating face, to make the vast, antique hangings flap and rustle. Everything in the chamber was outsized – the cavernous doorways were three times as high as a man, and the ceiling, painted with the peoples of the world bowing down before an enormous golden sun, was twice as high again. The immense canvases on the walls featured life-size figures in assorted majestic poses, whose warlike expressions would give Jezal uncomfortable shocks whenever he turned around.

It seemed a space for great men, for wise men, for epic heroes or mighty villains. A space for giants. Jezal felt a tiny, meagre, stupid fool in it.

'Your arm, if it please your Majesty,' murmured one of the tailors, managing to give Jezal orders while remaining crushingly sycophantic.

'Yes, of course . . . I'm sorry.' Jezal raised his arm a little higher, inwardly cursing at having apologised yet again. He was a king now, as Bayaz was constantly telling him. If he had shoved one of the tailors out of the window, no apology would have been necessary. The man would probably have thanked him profusely for the attention as he plummeted to the ground. As it was he merely gave a wooden smile, and smoothly unravelled his measuring tape. His colleague was crawling below, doing something similar around Jezal's knees. The third was punctiliously recording their observations in a marbled ledger.

Jezal took a long breath, and frowned into the mirror. An uncertain-seeming young idiot with a scar on his chin gazed back at him from the glass, draped with swatches of glittering cloth as though he were a tailor's dummy. He looked, and certainly felt, more like a clown than a king. He looked a joke, and undoubtedly would have laughed, had he not himself been the ridiculous punch-line.

'Perhaps something after the Osprian fashion, then?' The Royal Jeweller placed another wooden nonsense carefully on Jezal's head and examined the results. It was far from an improvement. The damn thing looked like nothing so much as an inverted chandelier.

'No, no!' snapped Bayaz, with some irritation. 'Far too fancy, far too clever, far too big. He will scarcely be able to stand in the damn thing! It needs to be simple, to be honest, to be light. Something a man could fight in!'

The Royal Jeweller blinked. 'He will be fighting in the crown?'

'No, dolt! But he must look as if he might!' Bayaz came up behind Jezal, snatched the wooden contraption from his head and tossed it rattling on the polished floor. Then he seized Jezal by the arms and stared grimly at his reflection from over his shoulder. 'This is a warrior king in the finest tradition! The natural heir to the Kingdom of Harod the Great! A peerless swordsman,

who has dealt wounds and received them, who has led armies to victory, who has killed men by the score!

'Score?' murmured Jezal, uncertainly.

Bayaz ignored him. 'A man as comfortable with saddle and sword as with throne and sceptre! His crown must go with armour. It must go with weapons. It must go with steel. Now do you understand?'

The Jeweller nodded slowly. 'I believe so, my Lord.'

'Good. And one more thing.'

'My Lord has but to name it.'

'Give it a big-arsed diamond.'

The Jeweller humbly inclined his head. 'That goes without saying.'

'Now out. Out, all of you! His Majesty has affairs of state to attend to.'

The ledger was snapped shut, the tapes were rolled up in a moment, the swatches of cloth were whisked away. The tailors and the Royal Jeweller bowed their way backwards from the room with a range of servile mutterings, whisking the huge, gilt-encrusted doors silently shut. Jezal had to stop himself from leaving with them. He kept forgetting that he was now his Majesty.

'I have business?' he asked, turning from the mirror and trying his best to sound offhand and masterful.

Bayaz ushered him out into the great hallway outside, its walls covered in beautifully rendered maps of the Union. 'You have business with your Closed Council.'

Jezal swallowed. The very name of the institution was daunting. Standing in marble chambers, being measured for new clothes, being called your Majesty, all of this was bemusing, but hardly required a great effort on his part. Now he was expected to sit at the very heart of government. Jezal dan Luthar, once widely celebrated for his towering ignorance, would be sharing a room with the twelve most powerful men in the Union. He would be expected to make decisions that would affect the lives of thousands. To hold his own in the arenas of politics, and law, and diplomacy, when his only areas of true expertise were fencing, drink, and women, and he was forced to concede that, in that last area at least, he did not seem to be quite the expert he had once reckoned himself.

'The Closed Council?' His voice shot up to a register more girlish than kingly, and he was forced to clear his throat. 'Is there some particular matter of importance?' he growled in an unconvincing bass.

'Some momentous news arrived from the North earlier today.'

'It did?'

'I am afraid that Lord Marshal Burr is dead. The army needs a new commander. Argument on that issue will probably take up a good few hours. Down here, your Majesty.'

'Hours?' muttered Jezal, his boot-heels clicking down a set of wide marble steps. Hours in the company of the Closed Council. He rubbed his hands nervously together.

Bayaz seemed to guess his thoughts. 'There is no need for you to fear those old wolves. You are their master, whatever they may have come to believe. At any time you can replace them, or have them dragged away in irons, for that matter, should you desire. Perhaps they have forgotten it. It might be that we

will need to remind them, in due course.'

They stepped through a tall gateway flanked by Knights of the Body, their helmets clasped under their arms but their faces kept so carefully blank they might as well have had their visors down. A wide garden lay beyond, lined on all four sides by a shady colonnade, its white marble pillars carved in the likenesses of trees in leaf. Water splashed from fountains, sparkling in the bright sunlight. A pair of huge orange birds with legs as thin as twigs strutted self-importantly about a perfectly clipped lawn. They stared haughtily at Jezal down their curved beaks as he passed them, evidently in no more doubt than him that he was an utter impostor.

He gazed at the bright flowers, and the shimmering greenery, and the fine statues. He stared up at the ancient walls, coated with red, white, and green creeper. Could it really be that all this belonged to him? All this, and the whole Agriont besides? Was he walking now in the mighty footsteps of the kings of old? Of Harod, and Casamir, and Arnault? It boggled the mind. Jezal had to blink and shake his head, as he had a hundred times already that day, simply to prevent himself from falling over. Was he not the same man as he had been last week? He rubbed at his beard, as if to check, and felt the scar beneath it. The same man who had been soaked out on the wide plain, who had been wounded among the stones, who had eaten half-cooked horsemeat and been glad to get it?

Jezal cleared his throat. 'I would like very much . . . I don't know whether it would be possible . . . to speak to my father?'

'Your father is dead.'

Jezal cursed silently to himself. 'Of course he is, I meant . . . the man I thought was my father.'

'What is it that you suppose he would tell you? That he made bad decisions? That he had debts? That he took money from me in return for raising you?'

'He took money?' muttered Jezal, feeling more forlorn than ever.

'Families rarely take in orphans out of good will, even those with a winning manner. The debts were cleared, and more than cleared. I left instructions that you should have fencing lessons as soon as you could hold a steel. That you should have a commission in the King's Own, and be encouraged to take part in the summer Contest. That you should be well prepared, in case this day should come. He carried out my instructions to the letter. But you can see that a meeting between the two of you would be an extremely awkward scene for you both. One best avoided.'

Jezal gave a ragged sigh. 'Of course. Best avoided.' An unpleasant thought crept across his mind. 'Is . . . is my name even Jezal?'

'It is now that you have been crowned.' Bayaz raised an eyebrow. 'Why, would you prefer another?'

'No. No, of course not.' He turned his head away and blinked back the tears. His old life had been a lie. His new one felt still more so. Even his own name was an invention. They walked in silence through the gardens for a moment, their feet crunching in the gravel, so fresh and perfect that Jezal wondered if every stone of it was daily cleaned by hand.

'Lord Isher will make many representations to your Majesty over the coming weeks and months.'

‘He will?’ Jezal coughed, and sniffed, and put on his bravest face. ‘Why?’

‘I promised him that his two brothers would be made Lords Chamberlain and Chancellor on the Closed Council. That his family would be preferred above all others. That was the price of his support in the vote.’

‘I see. Then I should honour the bargain?’

‘Absolutely not.’

Jezal frowned. ‘I am not sure that I—’

‘Upon achieving power, one should immediately distance oneself from all allies. They will feel they own your victory, and no rewards will ever satisfy them. You should elevate your enemies instead. They will gush over small tokens, knowing they do not deserve them. Heugen, Barezin, Skald, Meed, these are the men you should bring into your circle.’

‘Not Brock?’

‘Never Brock. He came too close to wearing the crown to ever feel himself beneath it. Sooner or later he must be kicked back into his place. But not until you are safe in your position, and have plentiful support.’

‘I see,’ Jezal puffed out his cheeks. Evidently there was more to being king than fine clothes, a haughty manner, and always getting the biggest chair.

‘This way.’ Out of the garden and into a shadowy hallway panelled with black wood and lined with an array of antique arms to boggle the mind. Assorted suits of full armour stood to glittering attention: plate and chain-mail, hauberk and cuirass, all stamped and emblazoned with the golden sun of the Union. Ceremonial greatswords as tall as a man, and halberds considerably taller, were bolted to the wall in an elaborate procession. Under them were mounted an army’s worth of axes, maces, morningstars and blades curved and straight, long and short, thick and thin. Weapons forged in the Union, weapons captured from the Gurmish, weapons stolen from Styrian dead on bloody battlefields. Victories and defeats, commemorated in steel. High above, the flags of forgotten regiments, gloriously slaughtered to a man in the wars of long ago, hung tattered and lifeless from charred pikestaves.

A heavy double door loomed at the far end of this collection, black and unadorned, as inviting as a scaffold. Knights Herald stood on either side of it, solemn as executioners, winged helmets glittering. Men taxed not only with guarding the centre of government, but with carrying the King’s Orders to whatever corner of the Union was necessary. His orders, Jezal realised with a sudden further lurch of nerves.

‘His Majesty seeks audience with the Closed Council,’ intoned Bayaz. The two men reached out and pulled the heavy doors open. An angry voice surged out into the corridor. ‘There must be further concessions or there will only be further unrest! We cannot simply—’

‘High Justice, I believe we have a visitor.’

The White Chamber was something of a disappointment after the magnificence of the rest of the palace. It was not that large. There was no decoration on the plain white walls. The windows were narrow, almost cell-like, making the place seem gloomy even in the sunshine. There was no draft and the air was uncomfortably close and stale. The only furniture was a long table of dark wood, piled high with papers, and six plain, hard chairs arranged down either side with another at the foot and one more, noticeably higher

than the others, at the head. Jezal's own chair, he supposed.

The Closed Council rose as he ducked reluctantly into the room. As frightening a selection of old men as could ever have been collected in one place, and every man of them staring right at Jezal in expectant silence. He jumped as the door was heaved shut behind him, the latch dropping with an unnerving finality.

'Your Majesty,' and Lord Chamberlain Hoff bowed deep, 'may I and my colleagues first congratulate you on your well-deserved elevation to the throne. We all feel that we have in you a worthy replacement for King Guslav, and look forward to advising you, and carrying out your orders, over the coming months and years.' He bowed again, and the collection of formidable old men clapped their hands in polite applause.

'Why, thank you all,' said Jezal, pleasantly surprised, however little he might feel like a worthy replacement for anything. Perhaps this would not be so painful as he had feared. The old wolves seemed tame enough to him.

'Please allow me to make the introductions,' murmured Hoff. 'Arch Lector Sult, head of your Inquisition.'

'An honour to serve, your Majesty.'

'High Justice Marovia, chief Law Lord.'

'Likewise, your Majesty, an honour.'

'With Lord Marshal Varuz, I believe you are already well acquainted.'

The old soldier beamed. 'It was a privilege to train you in the past, your Majesty, and will be a privilege to advise you now.'

So they went on, Jezal smiling and nodding to each man in turn. Halleck, the Lord Chancellor. Torlichorm, the High Consul. Reutzer, Lord Admiral of the Fleet, and so on, and so on. Finally Hoff ushered him to the high chair at the head of the table and Jezal enthroned himself while the Closed Council smiled on. He grinned gormlessly up at them for a moment, and then realised. 'Oh, please be seated.'

The old men sat, a couple of them with evident wincing of pain as old knees crunched and old backs clicked. Bayaz dropped carelessly into the chair at the foot of the table, opposite Jezal, as though he had been occupying it all his life. Robes rustled as old arses shifted on polished wood, and gradually the room went silent as a tomb. One chair was empty at Varuz' elbow. The chair where Lord Marshal Burr would have sat, had he not been assigned to duty in the North. Had he not been dead. A dozen daunting old men waited politely for Jezal to speak. A dozen old men who he had thought of until recently as occupying the pinnacle of power, all now answerable to him. A situation he could never have imagined in his most self-indulgent daydreams. He cleared his throat.

'Pray continue, my Lords. I will try and catch up as we go.'

Hoff flashed a humble smile. 'Of course, your Majesty. If at any time you require explanation, you have but to ask.'

'Thank you,' said Jezal, 'thank—'

Halleck's grinding voice cut over him. 'Back to the issue of discipline among the peasantry, therefore.'

'We have already prepared concessions!' snapped Sult. 'Concessions which the peasants were happy to accept.'

‘A shred of bandage to bind a suppurating wound!’ returned Marovia. ‘It is only a matter of time before rebellion comes again. The only way we can avoid it is by giving the common man what he needs. No more than is fair! We must involve him in the process of government.’

‘Involve him!’ sneered Sult.

‘We must transfer the burden of tax to the landowners!’

Halleck’s eyes rolled to the ceiling. ‘Not this nonsense again.’

‘Our current system has stood for centuries,’ barked Sult.

‘It has failed for centuries!’ threw back Marovia.

Jezal cleared his throat and the heads of the old men snapped round to look at him. ‘Could each man not simply be taxed the same proportion of his income, regardless of whether he is a peasant or a nobleman . . . and then, perhaps . . .’ He trailed off. It had seemed a simple enough idea to him, but now all eleven bureaucrats were staring at him, shocked, quite as if a domestic pet had been ill-advisedly allowed into the room, and it had suddenly decided to speak up on the subject of taxation. At the far end of the table, Bayaz silently examined his fingernails. There was no help there.

‘Ah, your Majesty,’ ventured Torlichorm in soothing tones, ‘such a system would be almost impossible to administer.’ And he blinked in a manner that said, ‘How do you manage to dress yourself, given your incredible ignorance?’

Jezal flushed to the lips of his ears. ‘I see.’

‘The subject of taxation,’ droned Halleck, ‘is a stupendously complex one.’ And he gave Jezal a look that said, ‘It is far too complex a subject to fit inside your tiny fragment of a mind.’

‘It would perhaps be better, your Majesty, if you were to leave the tedious details to your humble servants.’ Marovia had an understanding smile that said, ‘It would perhaps be better if you kept your mouth shut and avoided embarrassing the grown-ups.’

‘Of course.’ Jezal retreated shame-facedly into his chair. ‘Of course.’

And so it went on, as the morning ground by, as the strips of light from the windows slunk slowly over the heaps of papers across the wide table. Gradually, Jezal began to work out the rules of this game. Horribly complex, and yet horribly simple. The aging players were split roughly into two teams. Arch Lector Sult and High Justice Marovia were the captains, fighting viciously over every subject, no matter how small, each with three supporters who agreed with their every utterance. Lord Hoff, meanwhile, ineffectually assisted by Lord Marshal Varuz, played the role of referee, and struggled to build bridges across the unbridgeable divide between these two entrenched camps.

Jezal’s mistake had not been to think that he would not know what to say, though of course, he did not. His mistake had been to think that anyone would want him to say anything. All they cared about was continuing their own profitless struggles. They had become used, perhaps, to conducting the affairs of state with a drooling halfwit at the head of the table. Jezal now realised that they saw in him a like-for-like trade. He began to wonder if they were right.

‘If your Majesty could sign here . . . and here . . . and here . . . and there . . .’

The pen scratched against paper after paper, the old voices droned on, and

held forth, and bickered one with the other. The grey men smiled, and sighed, and shook their heads indulgently whenever he spoke, and so he spoke less and less. They bullied him with praise and blinded him with explanation. They bound him up in meaningless hours of law, and form, and tradition. He sagged slowly lower and lower into his uncomfortable chair. A servant brought wine, and he drank, and became drunk, and bored, and even more drunk and bored. Minute by stretched-out minute, Jezal began to realise: there was nothing so indescribably dull, once you got down to the nuts and bolts of it, as ultimate power.

‘Now to a sad matter,’ observed Hoff, once the most recent argument had sputtered to a reluctant compromise. ‘Our colleague, Lord Marshal Burr, is dead. His body is on its way back to us from the North, and will be interred with full honours. In the meantime, however, it is our duty to recommend a replacement. The first chair to be filled in this room since the death of the esteemed Chancellor Feekt. Lord Marshal Varuz?’

The old soldier cleared his throat, wincing as though he realised he was about to open a floodgate that might very well drown them all. ‘There are two clear contenders for the post. Both are men of undoubted bravery and experience, whose merits are well known to this council. I have no doubt that either General Poulder or General Kroy would—’

‘There can be not the slightest doubt that Poulder is the better man!’ snarled Sult, and Halleck immediately voiced his assent.

‘On the contrary!’ hissed Marovia, to angry murmurs from his camp, ‘Kroy is transparently the better choice!’

It was an area in which, as an officer of some experience, Jezal felt he might have been of some minuscule value, but not one of the Closed Council seemed even to consider seeking his opinion. He sagged back sulkily into his chair, and took another slurp of wine from his goblet while the old wolves continued to snap viciously at one another.

‘Perhaps we should discuss this matter at greater length later!’ cut in Lord Hoff over the increasingly acrimonious debate. ‘His Majesty is growing fatigued with the fine points of the issue, and there is no particular urgency to the matter!’ Sult and Marovia glared at each other, but did not speak. Hoff gave a sigh of relief. ‘Very well. Our next point of business relates to the supply of our army in England. Colonel West writes in his dispatches—’

‘West?’ Jezal sat up sharply, his voice rough with wine. The name was like smelling salts to a fainting girl, a solid and dependable rock to cling to in the midst of all this chaos. If only West had been there now, to help him through, things would have made so much more sense . . . he blinked at the chair that Burr had left behind him, sitting empty at Varuz’ shoulder. Jezal was drunk, perhaps, but he was king. He cleared his wet throat. ‘Colonel West shall be my new Lord Marshal!’

There was a stunned silence. The twelve old men stared. Then Torlichorm chuckled indulgently, in a manner that said, ‘How will we shut him up?’

‘Your Majesty, Colonel West is known to you personally, and a brave man, of course . . .’

The entire Council, it seemed, had finally found one issue on which they could all agree. ‘First through the breach at Ulrioch and so on,’ muttered

Varuz, shaking his head, 'but really—'

'... he is junior, and inexperienced, and ...'

'He is a commoner,' said Hoff, eyebrows raised.

'An unseemly break with tradition,' lamented Halleck.

'Poulder would be far superior!' snarled Sult at Marovia.

'Kroy is the man!' Marovia barked back.

Torlichorm gave a syrupy smile, of the kind a wet-nurse might use while trying to calm a troublesome infant. 'So you see, your Majesty, we cannot possibly consider Colonel West as—'

Jeza!s empty goblet bounced off Torlichorm's bald forehead with a loud crack and clattered away into the corner of the room. The old man gave a wail of shock and pain and slid from his chair, blood running from a long gash across his face.

'Cannot?' screamed Jeza!, on his feet, eyes starting from his head. 'You dare to give me fucking "cannot", you old bastard? You belong to me, all of you!' His finger stabbed furiously at the air. 'You exist to advise me, not to dictate to me! I rule here! Me!' He snatched up the ink bottle and hurled it across the room. It burst apart against the wall, spraying a great black stain across the plaster and splattering the arm of Arch Lector Sult's perfect white coat with black spots. 'Me! Me! The tradition we need here is one of fucking obedience!' He grabbed a sheaf of documents and flung them at Marovia, filling the air with fluttering paper. 'Never again give me "cannot!" Never!'

Eleven sets of dumbstruck eyes stared at Jeza!. One set smiled, down at the very end of the table. That made him angrier than ever. 'Collem West shall be my new Lord Marshal!' he screeched, and kicked his chair over in a fury. 'At our next meeting I will be treated with the proper respect, or I'll have the pack of you in chains! In fucking chains ... and ... and ...' His head was hurting, now, rather badly. He had thrown everything within easy reach, and was becoming desperately unsure of how to proceed.

Bayaz rose sternly from his chair. 'My Lords, that will be all for today.'

The Closed Council needed no further encouragement. Papers flapped, robes rustled, chairs squealed as they scrambled to be first out of the room. Hoff made it into the corridor. Marovia followed close behind and Sult swept after him. Varuz helped Torlichorm up from the floor and guided him by his elbow. 'I apologise,' he was wheezing as he was hustled, bloody-faced, through the door, 'your Majesty, I apologise profusely ...'

Bayaz stood sternly at the end of the table, watching the councillors hurry from the room. Jeza! lurked opposite, frozen somewhere between further anger and mortal embarrassment, but increasingly tending towards the latter. It seemed to take an age for the last member of the Closed Council to finally escape from the room, and for the great black doors to be dragged shut.

The First of the Magi turned towards Jeza!, and a broad smile broke suddenly out across his face. 'Richly done, your Majesty, richly done.'

'What?' Jeza! had been sure that he had made an ass of himself to a degree from which he could never recover.

'Your advisers will think twice before taking you lightly again, I think. Not a new strategy, but no less effective for that. Harod the Great was himself possessed of a fearsome temper, and made excellent use of it. After one of his

tantrums no one would dare to question his decisions for weeks.' Bayaz chuckled. 'Though I suspect that even Harod would have balked at dealing a wound to his own High Consul.'

'That was no tantrum!' snarled Jezal, his temper flickering up again. If he was beset by horrible old men, then Bayaz was himself the worst culprit by far. 'If I am a king I will be treated like one! I refuse to be dictated to in my own palace! Not by anyone . . . not by . . . I mean . . .'

Bayaz glared back at him, his green eyes frighteningly hard, and spoke with frosty calm. 'If your intention is to lose your temper with me, your Majesty, I would strongly advise against it.'

Jezal's rage had been on the very verge of fading already, and now, under the icy gaze of the Magus, it wilted away entirely. 'Of course . . . I'm sorry . . . I'm very sorry.' He closed his eyes and stared numbly down at the polished tabletop. He never used to say sorry for anything. Now that he was a king, and needed to apologise to no man, he found he could not stop. 'I did not ask for this,' he muttered weakly, flopping down in his chair. 'I don't know how it happened. I did nothing to deserve it.'

'Of course not.' Bayaz came slowly around the table. 'No man can ever deserve the throne. That is why you must strive to be worthy of it now. Every day. Just as your great predecessors did. Casamir. Arnault, Harod himself.'

Jezal took a long breath, and blew it out. 'You're right, of course. How can you always be right?'

Bayaz held up a humble hand. 'Always right? Scarcely. But I have the benefit of long experience, and am here to guide you as best I can. You have made a fine start along a difficult road, and you should be proud, as I am. There are certain steps we cannot delay, however. Chief among them is your wedding.'

Jezal gaped. 'Wedding?'

'An unmarried king is like a chair with three legs, your Majesty. Apt to fall. Your rump has only just touched the throne, and it is far from settled there. You need a wife who brings you support, and you need heirs so that your subjects may feel secure. All that delay will bring is opportunities for your enemies to work against you.'

The blows fell so rapidly that Jezal had to grasp his head, hoping to stop it flying apart. 'My enemies?' Had he not always tried to get on with everyone?

'Can you be so naïve? Lord Brock is doubtless already plotting against you. Lord Isher will not be put off indefinitely. Others on the Open Council supported you out of fear, or were paid to do so.'

'Paid?' gasped Jezal.

'Such support does not last forever. You must marry, and your wife must bring you powerful allies.'

'But I have . . .' Jezal licked his lips, uncertain of how to broach the subject. 'Some commitments . . . in that line.'

'Ardee West?' Jezal half opened his mouth to ask Bayaz how he knew so much about his romantic entanglements, but quickly thought better of it. The old man seemed to know far more about him than he did himself, after all. 'I know how it is, Jezal. I have lived a long life. Of course you love her. Of course you would give up anything for her, now. But that feeling, trust me,

will not last.'

Jezal shifted his weight uncomfortably. He tried to picture Ardee's uneven smile, the softness of her hair, the sound of her laugh. The way that had given him such comfort, out on the plain. But it was hard to think of her now without remembering her teeth sinking into his lip, his face tingling from her slap, the sound of the table creaking back and forward underneath them. The shame, and the guilt, and the complexity. Bayaz' voice continued: mercilessly calm, brutally realistic, ruthlessly reasonable.

'It is only natural that you made commitments, but your past life is gone, and your commitments have gone with it. You are a king, now, and your people demand that you behave like one. They need something to look up to. Something effortlessly higher than themselves. We are talking of the High Queen of the Union. A mother to kings. A farmer's daughter with a tendency towards unpredictable behaviour and a penchant for heavy drinking? I think not.' Jezal flinched to hear Ardee described that way, but he could hardly argue the point.

'You are a natural son. A wife of unimpeachable breeding would lend your line far greater weight. Far greater respect. There is a world full of eligible women, your Majesty, all born to high station. Dukes' daughters, and kings' sisters, beautiful and cultured. A world of princesses to choose from.'

Jezal felt his eyebrows rising. He loved Ardee, of course, but Bayaz made a devastating argument. There was so much more to think of now than his own needs. If the idea of himself as a king was absurd, the idea of Ardee as a queen was triply so. He loved her, of course. In a way. But a world of princesses to choose from? That was a phrase it was decidedly hard to find fault with.

'You see it!' The First of the Magi snapped his fingers in triumph. 'I will send to Duke Orso of Talins, that his daughter Terez should be introduced to you.' He held up a calming hand. 'Just to begin with, you understand. Talins would make a powerful ally.' He smiled, and leaned forward to murmur in Jezal's ear. 'But you need not leave everything behind, if you truly are attached to this girl. Kings often keep mistresses, you know.'

And that, of course, decided the matter.

Prepared for the Worst

Glokta sat in his dining room, staring down at his table, rubbing at his aching thigh with one hand. His other stirred absently at the fortune in jewels spread out on the black leather case.

Why do I do this? Why do I stay here, and ask questions? I could be gone on the next tide, and no one any worse off. Perhaps a tour of the beautiful cities of Styria? A cruise round the Thousand Isles? Finally to faraway Thond, or distant Suljuk, to live out my twisted days in peace among people who do not understand a word I say? Hurting no one? Keeping no secrets? Caring no more for innocence or guilt, for truth or for lies, than do these little lumps of rock.

The gems twinkled in the candlelight, clicking against each other, tickling at his fingers as he pushed them through one way, and back the other. *But his Eminence would weep and weep at my sudden disappearance. So, one imagines, would the banking house of Valint and Balk. Where in all the wide Circle of the World would I be safe from the tears of such powerful masters? And why? So I can sit on my crippled arse all the long day, waiting for the killers to come? So I can lie in bed, and ache, and think about all that I've lost?*

He frowned down at the jewels: clean, and hard, and beautiful. *I made my choices long ago. When I took Valint and Balk's money. When I kissed the ring of office. Before the Emperor's prisons, even, when I rode down to the bridge, sure that only magnificent Sand dan Glokta could save the world . . .*

A thumping knock echoed through the room and Glokta jerked his head up, toothless mouth hanging open. *As long as it is not the Arch Lector—*

'Open up, in the name of his Eminence!'

He grimaced at a spasm through his back as he dragged himself out of his chair, clawing the stones into a heap. Priceless, glittering handfuls of them. Sweat had broken out across his forehead.

What if the Arch Lector were to discover my little treasure trove? He giggled to himself as he snatched at the leather case. *I was going to mention all this, really I was, but the timing never seemed quite right. A small matter, after all – no more than a king's ransom.* His fingers fumbled with the jewels, and in his haste he flicked one astray and it dropped sparkling to the floor with a sharp click, click.

Another knock, louder this time, the heavy lock shuddering from the force of it. *'Open up!'*

'I'm just coming!' He forced himself down onto his hands and knees with a moan, casting about across the floor, his neck burning with pain. He saw it – a flat green one sitting on the boards, shining bright in the firelight.

Got you, you bastard! He snatched it up, pulled himself to his feet by the edge of the table, folded up the case, once, twice. *No time to hide it away.* He shoved it inside his shirt, right down so it was behind his belt, then he grabbed his cane and limped towards the front door, wiping his sweaty face,

adjusting his clothes, doing his best to present an unruffled appearance.

‘I’m coming! There’s no need to—’

Four huge Practicals shoved past him into his apartments, almost knocking him over. Beyond them, in the corridor outside, stood his Eminence the Arch Lector, frowning balefully, two more vast Practicals at his back. *A surprising hour for such a gratifying visit.* Glokta could hear the four men stomping around his apartments, throwing open doors, pulling open cupboards. *Never mind me, gentlemen, make yourself at home.* After a moment they marched back in.

‘Empty,’ grunted one, from behind his mask.

‘Huh,’ sneered Sult, moving smoothly over the threshold, staring about him with a scowl of contempt. *My new lodgings, it would seem, are scarcely more impressive than my old ones.* His six Practicals took up positions around the walls of Glokta’s dining room, arms folded across their chests, watching. *An awful lot of great big men, to keep an eye on one little cripple.*

Sult’s shoes stabbed at the floor as he strode up and down, his blue eyes bulging, a furious frown twisting his face. *It does not take a masterful judge of character to see that he is not a happy man. Might one of my ugly secrets have come to his attention? One of my little disobediences? Glokta felt a sweaty trembling slink up his bent spine. The non-execution of Magister Eider, perhaps? My agreement with Practical Vitari to tell less than the whole truth? The corner of the leather pouch dug gently into his ribs as he shifted his hips. Or merely the small matter of the large fortune with which I was purchased by a highly suspect banking house?*

An image sprang unbidden into Glokta’s mind, of the jewel-case suddenly splitting behind his belt, gems spilling from his trouser legs in a priceless cascade while the Arch Lector and his Practicals stared in amazement. *I wonder how I’d try to explain that one?* He had to stifle a giggle at the thought.

‘That bastard Bayaz!’ snarled Sult, his white-gloved hands curling into shaking fists.

Glokta felt himself relax by the smallest hair. *I am not the problem, then. Not yet, at least.* ‘Bayaz?’

‘That bald liar, that smirking impostor, that ancient charlatan! He has stolen the Closed Council!’ Stop, thief! ‘He has that worm Luthar dictating to us! You told me he was a spineless nothing!’ *I told you he used to be a spineless nothing, and you ignored me.* ‘This cursed puppy-dog proves to have teeth, and is not afraid to use them, and that First of the bastard Magi is holding his leash! He is laughing at us! He is laughing at me! At me!’ screamed Sult, stabbing at his chest with a clawing finger.

‘I—’

‘Damn your excuses, Glokta! I am drowning in a sea of damned excuses, when what I need are answers! What I need are solutions! What I need is to know more about this liar!’

Then perhaps this will impress you. ‘I have already, in fact, taken the liberty of some steps in that direction.’

‘What steps?’

‘I was able to take his Navigator into custody,’ said Glokta, allowing himself the smallest of smiles.

‘The Navigator?’ Sult gave no sign of being impressed. ‘And what did that

stargazing imbecile tell you?’

Glokta paused. ‘That he journeyed across the Old Empire to the edge of the World with Bayaz and our new king, before his enthronement.’ He struggled for words that would fit cleanly into Sult’s world of logic, and reasons, and neat explanations. ‘That they were seeking for . . . a relic, of the Old Time—’

‘Relics?’ asked Sult, his frown deepening. ‘Old Time?’

Glokta swallowed. ‘Indeed, but they did not find it—’

‘So we now know one of a thousand things that Bayaz did not do? Bah!’ Sult ripped angrily at the air with his hand. ‘He is nobody, and told you less than nothing! More of your myths and rubbish!’

‘Of course, your Eminence,’ muttered Glokta. *There really is no pleasing some people.*

Sult frowned down at the squares board under the window, his white-gloved hand hovering over the pieces as if to make a move. ‘I lose track of how often you have failed me, but I will give you a final chance to redeem yourself. Look into this First of the Magi once more. Find some weakness, some weapon we can use against him. He is a disease, and we must burn him out.’ He prodded angrily at one of the white pieces. ‘I want him destroyed! I want him finished! I want him in the House of Questions, in chains!’

Glokta swallowed. ‘Your Eminence, Bayaz is ensconced in the palace, and well beyond my reach . . . his protégé is now our King . . .’ *Thanks in part to our own desperate efforts.* Glokta almost winced, but he could not stop himself from asking the question. ‘How am I to do it?’

‘How?’ shrieked Sult, ‘how, you crippled worm?’ He swept his hand furiously across the board and dashed the pieces spinning across the floor. *And I wonder who will have to bend down to pick those up?* The six Practicals, as though controlled by the pitch of the Arch Lector’s voice, detached themselves from the walls and loomed menacingly into the room. ‘If I wished to attend to every detail myself I would have no need of your worthless services! Get out there and get it done, you twisted slime!’

‘Your Eminence is too kind,’ muttered Glokta, humbly inclining his head once more. *But even the lowest dog needs a scratch behind the ears, from time to time, or he might go for his master’s throat . . .*

‘And look into his story while you’re about it.’

‘Story, Arch Lector?’

‘This fairytale of Carmee dan Roth!’ Sult’s eyes went narrower still, hard creases cutting into the bridge of his nose. ‘If we cannot take the leash ourselves, we must have the dog put down, do you understand?’

Glokta felt his eye twitching, in spite of his efforts to make it be still. *We find a way to bring King Jezal’s reign to an abrupt end. Dangerous. If the Union is a ship, it has but lately come through a storm, and is listing badly. We have lost one captain. Replace another now, and the boat might break apart entirely. We will all be swimming in some deep, cold, unknown waters then. Civil War, anyone?* He frowned down at the squares pieces scattered across his floor. *But his Eminence has spoken. What is it that Shickel said? When your master gives you a task, you do your best at it. Even if the task is a dark one. And some of us are only suited to dark tasks . . .*

‘Carmee dan Roth, and her bastard. I shall find the truth of it, your

Eminence, you can depend on me.'

Sult's sneer curled to even greater heights of contempt. 'If only!'

The House of Questions was busy, for an evening. Glokta saw no one as he limped down the corridor, his excuses for teeth pressed into his lip, his hand clenched tight around the handle of his cane, slippery with sweat. He saw no one, but he heard them.

Voices bubbled from behind the iron-bound doors. Low and insistent. *Asking the questions*. High and desperate. *Spilling the answers*. From time to time a shriek, or a roar, or a howl of pain would cut through the heavy silence. *Those hardly need explaining*. Severard was leaning against the dirty wall as Glokta limped towards him, one foot up on the plaster, whistling tunelessly behind his mask.

'What's all this?' asked Glokta.

'Some of Lord Brock's people got drunk, then they got noisy. Fifty of 'em, made quite a mess up near the Four Corners. Moaning about rights, whining on how the people were cheated, mouthing off how Brock should've been king. They say it was a demonstration. We say it was treason.'

'Treason, eh?' *The definition is notoriously flexible*. 'Pick out some ringleaders and get some paper signed. Angland is back in Union hands. High time we started filling the place up with traitors.'

'They're already at it. Anything else?'

'Oh, of course.' *Juggling knives. One comes down, two go up. Always more blades spinning in the air, and each one with a deadly edge*. 'I had a visit from his Eminence earlier today. A brief visit, but too long for my taste.'

'Work for us?'

'Nothing that will make you a rich man, if that's what you're hoping for.'

'I'm always hoping. I'm what you call an optimist.'

'Lucky for you.' I rather tend the other way. Glokta took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. 'The First of the Magi and his bold companions.'

'Again?'

'His Eminence wants information.'

'This Bayaz, though. Isn't he tight with our new king?'

Glokta raised an eyebrow as a muffled roar of pain echoed down the corridor. *Tight? He might as well have made him out of clay*. 'That is why we must keep our eyes upon him, Practical Severard. For his own protection. Powerful men have powerful enemies, as well as powerful friends.'

'Think that Navigator knows anything else?'

'Nothing that will do the trick.'

'Shame. I was getting used to having the little bastard around. He tells a hell of a story about a huge fish.'

Glokta sucked at his empty gums. 'Keep him where he is for now. Perhaps Practical Frost will appreciate his tall tales.' He has a fine sense of humour.

'If the Navigator's no use, who do we squeeze?'

Who indeed? Ninefingers is gone. Bayaz himself is tucked up tight in the palace, and his apprentice hardly leaves his side. The erstwhile Jezal dan Luthar, we must

concede, is now far beyond our reach . . . ‘What about that woman?’

Severard looked up. ‘What, that brown bitch?’

‘She’s still in the city, isn’t she?’

‘Last I heard.’

‘Follow her, then, and find out what she’s about.’

The Practical paused. ‘Do I have to?’

‘What? You scared?’

Severard lifted up his mask and scratched underneath it. ‘I can think of people I’d rather follow.’

‘Life is a series of things we would rather not do.’ Glokta looked up and down the corridor, making sure there was no one there. ‘We also need to ask some questions about Carmee dan Roth, supposed mother of our present king.’

‘What sort of questions?’

He leaned towards Severard and hissed quietly in his ear. ‘Questions like – did she really bear a child before she died? Was that child really the issue of the overactive loins of King Guslav? Is that child truly the same man that we now have on the throne? You know the kind of questions.’ *Questions that could land us in a great deal of trouble. Questions that some people might call treason. After all, the definition is notoriously flexible.*

Severard’s mask looked the same as ever, but the rest of his face was decidedly worried. ‘You sure we want to go digging there?’

‘Why don’t you ask the Arch Lector if he’s sure? He sounded sure to me. Get Frost to help you if you’re having trouble.’

‘But . . . what are we looking for? How will we—’

‘How?’ hissed Glokta. ‘If I wished to attend to every detail myself I would have no need of your services. Get out there and get it done!’

When Glokta had been young and beautiful, quick and promising, admired and envied, he had spent a great deal of time in the taverns of Adua. *Though I never remember falling this far, even in my darkest moods.*

He scarcely felt out of place now, as he hobbled among the customers. To be crippled was the norm here, and he had more teeth than average. Nearly everyone carried unsightly scars or debilitating injuries, sores or warts to make a toad blush. There were men with faces rough as the skin on a bowl of old porridge. Men who shook worse than leaves in a gale and stank of week-old piss. Men who looked as if they’d slit a child’s throat just to keep their knives sharp. A drunken whore slouched against a post in an attitude that could hardly have been arousing to the most desperate sailor. *That same reek of sour beer and hopelessness, sour sweat and early death that I remember from the sites of my worst excesses. Only stronger.*

There were some private booths at one end of the stinking common room, vaulted archways full of miserable shadows and even more miserable drunks. *And who might one expect to find in such surroundings?* Glokta shuffled to a stop beside the last of them.

‘Well, well, well. I never thought I’d see you alive again.’

Nicomio Cosca looked even worse than when Glokta first met him, if that

was possible. He was spread out against the slimy wall, his hands dangling, his head hanging over to one side, his eyes scarcely open as he watched Glokta work his painful way into a chair opposite. His skin was soapy pale in the flickering light from the single mean candle flame, dark pouches under his eyes, dark shadows shifting over his pinched and pointed face. The rash on his neck had grown angrier, and spread up the side of his jaw like ivy up a ruin. *With just a little more effort he might look nearly as ill as me.*

'Superior Glokta,' he wheezed, in a voice as rough as tree-bark, 'I am delighted that you received my message. What an honour to renew our acquaintance, against all the odds. Your masters did not reward your efforts in the South with a cut throat, eh?'

'I was as surprised as you are, but no.' *Though there is still ample time.* 'How was Dagoska after I left?'

The Styrian puffed out his hollow cheeks. 'Dagoska was a real mess, since you are asking. A lot of men dead. A lot of men made slaves. That's what happens when the Gurkish come to dinner, eh? Good men with bad endings, and the bad men did little better. Bad endings for everyone. Your friend General Vissbruck got one of them.'

'I understand he cut his own throat.' *To rapturous approval from the public.* 'How did you get away?'

The corner of Cosca's mouth curled up, as though he would have liked to smile but had not the energy. 'I disguised myself as a servant girl, and I fucked my way out.'

'Ingenious.' *But far more likely you were the one who opened the gates to the Gurkish, in return for your freedom. I wonder if I would have done the same, in that position? Probably.* 'And lucky for us both.'

'They say that luck is a woman. She's drawn to those that least deserve her.'

'Perhaps so.' *Though I appear to be both undeserving and unlucky.* 'It is certainly fortunate that you should appear in Adua at this moment. Things are . . . unsettled.'

Glokta heard a squeaking, rustling sound and a large rat dashed out from under his chair and paused for a moment in full view. Cosca delved a clumsy hand into his stained jacket and whipped it out. A throwing knife flew out with it, flashed through the air. It shuddered into the boards a good stride or two wide of the mark. The rat sat there for a moment longer, as though to communicate its contempt, then scurried away between the table and chair legs, the scuffed boots of the patrons.

Cosca sucked at his stained teeth as he slithered from the booth to retrieve his blade. 'I used to be dazzling with a throwing knife, you know.'

'Beautiful women used to hang from my every word.' Glokta sucked at his own empty gums. 'Times change.'

'So I hear. All kinds of changes. New rulers mean new worries. Worries mean business, for people in my trade.'

'It might be that I will have a use for your particular talents, before too long.'

'I cannot say that I would turn you down.' Cosca tipped his bottle up and stuck his tongue into the neck, licking out the last trickle. 'My purse is empty as a dry well. So empty, in fact, that I don't even have a purse.'

There, at least, I am able to assist. Glokta checked that they were not observed, then tossed something across the rough table top and watched it bounce with a click and a spin to a halt in front of Cosca. The mercenary picked it up between finger and thumb, held it to the candle flame and stared at it through one bloodshot eye. 'This seems to be a diamond.'

'Consider yourself on retainer. I daresay you could find some like-minded men to assist you. Some reliable men, who tell no tales and ask no questions. Some good men, to help out.'

'Some bad men, do you mean?'

Glokta grinned, displaying the gaps in his teeth. 'Well. I suppose that all depends on whether you're the employer, or you're the job.'

'I suppose it does at that.' Cosca let his empty bottle drop to the ill-formed floorboards. 'And what is the job, Superior?'

'For now, just to wait, and stay out of sight.' He leaned from the booth with a wince and snapped his fingers at a surly serving girl. 'Another bottle of what my friend is drinking!'

'And later?'

'I'm sure I can find something for you to do.' He shuffled painfully forward in his chair to whisper. 'Between you and me, I heard a rumour that the Gurmish are coming.'

Cosca winced. 'Them again? Must we? Those bastards don't play by the rules. God, and righteousness, and belief.' He shuddered. 'Makes me nervous.'

'Well, whoever it is banging on the door, I'm sure I can organise a heroic last stand, against the odds, without hope of relief.' *I am not lacking for enemies, after all.*

The mercenary's eyes glinted as the girl thumped a full bottle down on the warped table before him. 'Ah, lost causes. My favourite.'

The Habit of Command

West sat in the Lord Marshal's tent and stared hopelessly into space. For the past year he had scarcely had an idle moment. Now, suddenly, there was nothing for him to do but wait. He kept expecting to see Burr push through the flap and walk to the maps, his fists clenched behind him. He kept expecting to feel his reassuring presence around the camp, to hear his booming voice call the wayward officers to order. But of course he would not. Not now and not ever again.

On the left sat General Kroy's staff, solemn and sinister in their black uniforms, as rigidly pressed as ever. On the right lounged Poulder's men, top buttons carelessly undone in an open affront to their opposite numbers, as puffed-up as peacocks displaying their tail feathers. The two great Generals themselves eyed each other with all the suspicion of rival armies across a battlefield, awaiting the edict that would raise one of them to the Closed Council and the heights of power, and dash the other's hopes for ever. The edict that would name the new King of the Union, and his new Lord Marshal.

It was to be Poulder or Kroy, of course, and both anticipated their final, glorious victory over the other. In the meantime the army, and West in particular, sat paralysed. Powerless. Far to the north the Dogman and his companions, who had saved West's life in the wilderness more times than he could remember, were no doubt fighting for survival, watching desperately for help that would never come.

For West, the entire business was very much like being at his own funeral, and one attended chiefly by sneering, grinning, posturing enemies. It was to be Poulder or Kroy, and whichever one it was, he was doomed. Poulder hated him with a flaming passion, Kroy with an icy scorn. The only fall swifter and more complete than his own would be that of Poulder, or of Kroy, whichever of them was finally overlooked by the Closed Council.

There was a dim commotion outside, and heads turned keenly to look. There was a scuffle of feet up to the tent, and several officers rose anxiously from their chairs. The flap was torn aside and the Knight Herald finally burst jingling through it. He was immensely tall, the wings on his helmet almost poking a hole in the tent's ceiling as he straightened up. He had a leather case over one armoured shoulder, stamped with the golden sun of the Union. West stared at it, holding his breath.

'Present your message,' urged Kroy, holding out his hand.

'Present it to me!' snapped Poulder.

The two men jostled each other with scant dignity while the Knight Herald frowned down at them, impassive. 'Is Colonel West in attendance?' he demanded, in a booming bass. Every eye, and most especially those of Poulder and Kroy, swivelled round.

West found himself rising hesitantly from his chair. 'Er . . . I am West.'

The Knight Herald stepped carelessly around General Kroy and advanced on West, spurs rattling. He opened his dispatch case, pulled out a roll of parchment and held it up. 'On the king's orders.'

The final irony of West's unpredictable career, it seemed, was that he would be the one to announce the name of the man who would dismiss him in dishonour moments later. But if he was to fall on his sword, delay would only increase the pain. He took the scroll from the Knight's gauntleted hand and broke the heavy seal. He unrolled it halfway, a block of flowing script coming into view. The room held its breath as he began to read.

West gave vent to a disbelieving giggle. Even with the tent as tense as a courtroom waiting for judgement, he could not help himself. He had to go over the first section twice more before he came close to taking it in.

'What is amusing?' demanded Kroy.

'The Open Council has elected Jezal dan Luthar as the new King of the Union, henceforth known as Jezal the First.' West had to stifle more laughter even though, if it was a joke, it was not a funny one.

'Luthar?' someone asked. 'Who the hell is Luthar?'

'That boy who won the Contest?'

It was all, somehow, awfully appropriate. Jezal had always behaved as though he was better than everyone else. Now, it seemed, he was. But all of that, momentous though it might have been, was a side-issue here.

'Who is the new Lord Marshal?' growled Kroy, and the two staffs shuffled forward, all on their feet now, forming a half-circle of expectation.

West took a deep breath, gathered himself like a child preparing to plunge into an icy pool. He pulled the scroll open and his eyes scanned quickly over the lower block of writing. He frowned. Neither Poulder's name nor Kroy's appeared anywhere. He read it again, more carefully. His knees felt suddenly very weak.

'Who does it name?' Poulder nearly shrieked. West opened his mouth, but he could not find the words. He held the letter out, and Poulder snatched it from his hand while Kroy struggled unsuccessfully to look over his shoulder.

'No,' breathed Poulder, evidently having reached the end.

Kroy wrestled the dispatch away and his eyes flickered over it. 'This must be a mistake!'

But the Knight Herald did not think so. 'The Closed Council are not in the habit of making mistakes. You have the King's orders!' He turned to West and bowed. 'My Lord Marshal, I bid you farewell.'

The army's best and brightest all gawped at West, jaws dangling. 'Er . . . yes,' he managed to stammer. 'Yes, of course.'

An hour later, the tent was empty. West sat alone at Burr's writing desk, nervously arranging and rearranging the pen, ink, paper, and most of all the large letter he had just sealed with a blob of red wax. He frowned down at it, and up at the maps on the boards, and back down at his hands sitting idle on the scarred leather, and he tried to understand what the hell had happened.

As far as he could tell, he had been suddenly elevated to one of the highest

positions in the Union. Lord Marshal West. With the possible exception of Bethod himself, he was the most powerful man on this side of the Circle Sea. Poulder and Kroy would be obliged to call him 'sir'. He had a chair on the Closed Council. Him! Collem West! A commoner, who had been scorned, and bullied, and patronised his entire life. How could it possibly have happened? Not through merit, certainly. Not through any action or inaction on his part. Through pure chance. A chance friendship with a man who, in many ways, he did not particularly like, and had certainly never expected to do him any favours. A man who, in a stroke of fortune that could only be described as a miracle, had now ascended to the throne of the Union.

His disbelieving laughter was short-lived. A most unpleasant image was forming in his head. Prince Ladisla, lying somewhere in the wilderness with his head broken open, half-naked and unburied. West swallowed. If it had not been for him, Ladisla would now be king, and he would be swabbing latrines instead of preparing to take command of the army. His head was starting to hurt and he rubbed uncomfortably at his temples. Perhaps he had played a crucial part in his own advancement after all.

The tent flap rustled as Pike came through with his burned-out ruin of a grin. 'General Kroy is here.'

'Let him sweat a moment.' But it was West who was sweating. He wiped his moist palms together and tugged the jacket of his uniform smooth, his Colonel's insignia but recently cut from the shoulders. He had to appear to be in complete and effortless control, just as Marshal Burr had always done. Just as Marshal Varuz had used to, out in the dry wastelands of Gurkhul. He had to squash Poulder and Kroy while he had the chance. If he did not do it now, he would be forever at their mercy. A piece of meat, torn between two furious dogs. He reluctantly picked up the letter and held it out to Pike.

'Could we not just hang the pair of them, sir?' asked the convict as he took it.

'If only. But we cannot do without them, however troublesome they may be. A new King, a new Lord Marshal, both men that, by and large, no one has ever heard of. The soldiers need leaders they know.' He took a long breath through his nose, puffing out his chest. Each man had to do his part, and that was all. He let it hiss out. 'Show in General Kroy, please.'

'Yes, sir.' Pike held the tent flap open and roared out, 'General Kroy!'

Kroy's black uniform, chased about the collar with embroidered golden leaves, was so heavily starched that it was a surprise he could move at all. He drew himself up and stood to vibrating attention, eyes fixed on the middle distance. His salute was impeccable, every part of his body in regulation position, and yet he somehow managed to make his contempt and disappointment plain to see.

'May I first offer my congratulations,' he grated, 'Lord Marshal.'

'Thank you, General. Graciously said.'

'A considerable promotion, for one so young, so inexperienced—'

'I have been a professional soldier some dozen years, and fought in two wars and several battles. It would seem his Majesty the King deems me sufficiently seasoned.'

Kroy cleared his throat. 'Of course, Lord Marshal. But you are new to high

command. In my opinion you would be wise to seek the assistance of a more experienced man.'

'I agree with you absolutely.'

Kroy lifted one eyebrow a fraction. 'I am glad to hear that.'

'That man should, without the slightest doubt, be General Poulder.' To give him credit, Kroy's face did not move. A small squeak issued from his nose. The only indication of what, West did not doubt, was his boundless dismay. He had been hurt when he arrived. Now he was reeling. The very best time to plunge the blade in to the hilt. 'I have always been a great admirer of General Poulder's approach to soldiering. His dash. His vigour. He is, to my mind, the very definition of what an officer should be.'

'Quite so,' hissed Kroy through gritted teeth.

'I am taking his advice in a number of areas. There is only one major issue upon which we differed.'

'Indeed?'

'You, General Kroy.' Kroy's face had assumed the colour of a plucked chicken, the trace of scorn replaced quick-time by a definite tinge of horror. 'Poulder was of the opinion that you should be dismissed immediately. I was for giving you one more chance. Sergeant Pike?'

'Sir.' The ex-convict stepped forward smartly and held out the letter. West took it from him and displayed it to the General.

'This is a letter to the king. I begin by reminding him of the happy years we served together in Adua. I go on to lay out in detail the reasons for your immediate dismissal in dishonour. Your unrepentant stubbornness, General Kroy. Your tendency to steal the credit. Your bloodless inflexibility. Your insubordinate reluctance to work with other officers.' If it was possible for Kroy's face to grow yet more drawn and pale it did so, steadily, as he stared at the folded paper. 'I earnestly hope that I will never have to send it. But I will, at the slightest provocation to myself or to General Poulder, am I understood?'

Kroy appeared to grope for words. 'Perfectly understood,' he croaked in the end, 'my Lord Marshal.'

'Excellent. We are extremely tardy in setting off for our rendezvous with our Northern allies and I hate to arrive late to a meeting. You will transfer your cavalry to my command, for now. I will be taking them north with General Poulder, in pursuit of Bethod.'

'And I, sir?'

'A few Northmen still remain on the hills above us. It will be your task to sweep them away and clear the road to Carleon, giving our enemies the impression that our main body has not moved north. Succeed in that and I may be willing to trust you with more. You will make the arrangements before first light.' Kroy opened his mouth, as though about to complain at the impossibility of the request. 'You have something to add?'

The General quickly thought better of it. 'No, sir. Before first light, of course.' He even managed to force his face into a shape vaguely resembling a smile.

West did not have to try too hard to smile back. 'I am glad you are embracing this chance to redeem yourself, General. You are dismissed.' Kroy snapped to attention once more, spun on his heel, caught his leg up with his

sabre and stumbled from the tent in some disarray.

West took a long breath. His head was pounding. He wanted nothing more than to lie down for a few moments, but there was no time. He tugged the jacket of his uniform smooth again. If he had survived that nightmare journey north through the snow, he could survive this. 'Send in General Poulder.'

Poulder swaggered into the tent as though he owned the place and stood to slapdash attention, his salute as flamboyant as Kroy's had been rigid. 'Lord Marshal West, I would like to extend to you my earnest congratulations on your unexpected advancement.' He grinned unconvincingly, but West did not join him. He sat there, frowning up at Poulder as if he was a problem that he was considering a harsh solution to. He sat there for some time, saying nothing. The General's eyes began to dart nervously around the tent. He gave an apologetic cough. 'Might I ask, Lord Marshal, what you had to discuss with General Kroy?'

'Why, all manner of things.' West kept his face stony hard. 'My respect for General Kroy on all matters military is boundless. We are much alike, he and I. His precision. His attention to detail. He is, to my mind, the very definition of what a soldier should be.'

'He is a most accomplished officer,' Poulder managed to hiss.

'He is. I have been elevated with great rapidity to my position, and I feel I need a senior man, a man with a wealth of experience, to act as a . . . as a mentor, if you will, now that Marshal Burr is gone. General Kroy has been good enough to agree to serve in that capacity.'

'Has he indeed?' A sheen of sweat was forming across Poulder's forehead.

'He has made a number of excellent suggestions which I am already putting into practice. There was only one issue on which we could not agree.' He steepled his fingers on the desk before him and looked sternly at Poulder over the top of them. 'You were that issue, General Poulder. You.'

'I, Lord Marshal?'

'Kroy pressed for your immediate dismissal.' Poulder's fleshy face was rapidly turning pink. 'But I have decided to extend to you one final opportunity.'

West picked up the very same paper that he had displayed to Kroy. 'This is a letter to the king. I begin by thanking him for my promotion, by enquiring after his health, by reminding him of our close personal friendship. I go on to lay out in detail the reasons for your immediate cashiering in disgrace. Your unbecoming arrogance, General Poulder. Your tendency to steal the credit. Your reluctance to obey orders. Your stubborn inability to work with other officers. I earnestly hope that I will never have to send it. But I will, at the slightest provocation. The slightest provocation to myself or to General Kroy, am I understood?'

Poulder swallowed, sweat glistening all over his ruddy face. 'You are, my Lord Marshal.'

'Good. I am trusting General Kroy to seize control of the hills between us and Carleon. Until you prove yourself worthy of a separate command you will stay with me. I want your division ready to move north before first light, and the swiftest units to the fore. Our Northern allies are relying on us, and I do not mean to let them down. At first light, General, and with the greatest

speed.'

'The greatest speed, of course. You can rely on me . . . sir.'

'I hope so, in spite of my reservations. Every man must do his part, General Poulder. Every man.'

Poulder blinked and worked his mouth, half turned to leave, remembered belatedly to salute, then strode from the tent. West watched the flap moving ever so gently in the wind outside, then he sighed, crumpled the letter up in his hand and tossed it away into the corner. It was nothing but a blank sheet of paper, after all.

Pike raised one pink, mostly hairless brow. 'Sweetly done, sir, if I may say. Even in the camps, I never saw better lying.'

'Thank you, Sergeant. Now that I begin, I find I warm to the work. My father always warned me against untruths, but between you and me the man was a shit, a coward, and a failure. If he was here now I'd spit in his face.'

West rose and walked to the largest-scale of the maps, stood before it, his hands clasped behind his back. In just the way that Marshal Burr would have done, he realised. He examined the dirty finger-smudge in the mountains where Crummock-i-Phail had indicated the position of his fortress. He traced the route to the Union army's own current position, far to the south, and frowned. It was hard to believe that a Union cartographer could ever have come close to surveying that terrain in person, and the flamboyant shapes of the hills and rivers had an undoubted flavour of make-believe about them.

'How long do you think it will take to get there, sir?' asked Pike.

'Impossible to say.' Even if they got started immediately, which was unlikely. Even if Poulder did as he was told, which was doubly so. Even if the map was halfway accurate, which he knew it was not. He shook his head grimly. 'Impossible to say.'

The First Day

The eastern sky was just catching fire. Long strips of pink cloud and long strips of black cloud were stretched out across the pale blue, the hazy grey shapes of mountains notched and jagged as a butcher's knife underneath. The western sky was a mass of dark iron still – cold and comfortless.

'Nice day for it,' said Crummock.

'Aye.' But Logen wasn't sure there was any such a thing.

'Well, if Bethod don't show, and we get nothing killed at all, at least you lot will have done wonders for my wall, eh?'

It was amazing how well and how fast a man could patch a wall when it was the pile of stones that might save his own life. A few short days and they had the whole stretch of it built up and mortared, most of the ivy cut away. From inside the fort, where the ground was that much higher, it didn't look too fearsome. From outside it was three times the height of a tall man up to the walkway. They'd new made the parapet neck-high at the top, with plenty of good slots for shooting and throwing rocks from. Then they'd dug out a decent ditch in front, and lined it with sharp stakes.

They were still digging, over on the left where the wall met the cliff and it was easiest to climb over. That was Dow's stretch, and Logen could hear him shouting at his boys over the sound of shovels. 'Get digging, you lazy fucks! I'll not be killed for your lack of work! Put your back into it, you bastards!' and so on, all day long. One way of getting work out of a man, Logen reckoned.

They'd dug the ditch out especially deep right in front of the old gate. A nice reminder to everyone that there were no plans to leave. But it was still the weakest spot, and there was no missing it. That was where Logen would be, if Bethod came. Right in the middle, on Shivers' stretch of wall. He was standing above the archway now, not far from Logen and Crummock, his long hair flapping about in the breeze, pointing out some cracks that still needed mortaring.

'Wall's looking good!' Logen shouted at him.

Shivers looked round, worked his mouth, then spat over his shoulder. 'Aye,' he growled, and turned away.

Crummock leaned close. 'If it comes to a battle you'll have to watch your back with that one, Bloody-Nine.'

'I reckon so.' The middle of a fight was a good place to settle a score with a man on your own side. No one ever checked too carefully if the corpses got it in the back or the front once the fighting was done. Everyone too busy crying at their cuts, or digging, or running away. Logen gave the big hillman a long stare. 'I'll have a lot of men to watch if it comes to a battle. We ain't so very friendly that you won't be one of 'em.'

'Likewise,' said Crummock, grinning all the way across his big, bearded

face. 'We both got a reputation for being none too picky who gets killed, once the killing starts. But that's no bad thing. Too much trust makes men sloppy.'

'Too much trust?' It had been a while since Logen had too much of anything except enemies. He jerked his thumb towards the tower. 'I'm going up, check if they've seen anything.'

'I hope they have!' said Crummock, rubbing his fat palms together. 'I hope that bastard comes today!'

Logen hopped down from the wall and walked out across the fort, if you could call it that, past Carls and hillmen, sat in groups eating, or talking, or cleaning weapons. A few who'd been on guard through the night wrapped up in blankets, asleep. He passed the pen where the sheep were huddled together, a good deal fewer than there had been. He passed the makeshift forge set up near the stone shed, a couple of soot-smeared men working a bellows, another pouring metal into moulds for arrow heads. They'd need a damn lot of arrow-heads if Bethod came calling. He came to the narrow steps cut into the rock-face and took them two at a time, up above the fort to the top of the tower.

There was a big pile of rocks for throwing up there, on that shelf on the mountainside, and six big barrels wedged full of shafts. The pick of the archers stood at the new-mortared parapets, the men with the best eyes and the best ears, keeping watch for Bethod. Logen saw the Dogman in amongst the rest, with Grim on one side of him and Tul on the other.

'Chief!' It still made Logen smile to say it. A long time, they'd done things the other way around, but it worked a lot better like this, to his mind. At least no one was scared all the time. Not of their own chief, anyway. 'See anything?'

The Dogman grinned round, and offered him out a flask. 'A lot, as it goes.'

'Uh,' said Grim. The sun was getting up above the mountains now, slitting the clouds with bright lines, eating into the shadows across the hard land, burning away the dawn haze. The great fells loomed up bold and careless on either side, smeared with yellow green grass and fern on the slopes, strips of bare rock breaking through the brown summits. Below, the bare valley was quiet and still. Spotted with thorn bushes and clumps of stunted trees, creased with the paths of dried-out streams. Just as empty as it had been the day before, and the day before that, and ever since they'd got there.

It reminded Logen of his youth, climbing up in the High Places, alone. Days at a time, testing himself against the mountains. Before his was a name that anyone had heard of. Before he married, or had children, and before his wife and his children went back to the mud. The happy valleys of the past. He sucked in a long, cold breath of the high air, and he blew it out. 'It's quite a spot for a view, alright, but I meant have we seen anything of our old friend.'

'You mean Bethod, the right royal King of the Northmen? No, no sign of him. Not a hair.'

Tul shook his big head. 'Would've expected there to be some sign by now, if he was coming.'

Logen sloshed some water round his mouth and spat it out over the side of the tower, watched it splatter on the rocks way down below. 'Maybe he won't fall for it.' He could see the happy side of Bethod not coming. Vengeance is a nice enough notion at a distance, but the getting of it close up isn't so very

pretty. Especially when you're outnumbered ten to one with nowhere to run to.

'Maybe he won't at that,' said Dogman, wistful. 'How's the wall?'

'Alright, long as they don't bring such a thing as a ladder with 'em. How long do you reckon we wait, before we—'

'Uh,' grunted Grim, his long finger pointing down into the valley.

Logen saw a flicker of movement down there. And again. He swallowed. A couple of men, maybe, creeping through the boulders like beetles through gravel. He felt the men tense up all around him, heard them muttering. 'Shit,' he hissed. He looked sideways at the Dogman, and the Dogman looked back. 'Seems like Crummock's plan worked.'

'Seems that way. Far as getting Bethod to follow us, at least.'

'Aye. The rest is the tricky bit.' The bit that was more than likely to get them all killed, but Logen knew they were all thinking it without him saying a word.

'Now we just hope that the Union keeps their end of the deal,' said Dogman.

'We hope.' Logen tried to smile, but it didn't come out too good. Hoping had never turned out that well for him.

Once they'd started coming, the valley had filled up quick, right in front of Dogman's eyes. Nice and clean, just the way Bethod had always done things. The standards were set out between the two rock faces, three times a good bowshot distant, and the Carls and the Thralls were pressed in tight around 'em, all looking up towards their wall. The sun was getting up high in a blue sky with just a few shreds of cloud to cast a shadow, and all that weight of steel flashed and sparked like the sea under the moon.

Their signs were all there, all Bethod's best from way back – Whitesides, Goring, Pale-as-Snow, Littlebone. Then there were others – sharp and ragged marks from out past the Crinna. Wild men, made dark and bloody deals with Bethod. Dogman could hear them whooping and calling to each other, strange sounds like animals might make in the forest.

Quite a gathering, all in all, and the Dogman could smell the fear and the doubt thick as soup up on the wall. A lot of weapons being fingered, a lot of lips being chewed. He did his best to keep his face hard and careless, the way that Threetrees would've done. The way a chief should. However much his own knees wanted to tremble.

'How many now, you reckon?' asked Logen.

Dogman let his eyes wander over 'em, thinking about it. 'Eight thousand do you think, or ten, maybe?'

A pause. 'That's about what I was thinking.'

'A lot more'n us, anyway,' Dogman said, keeping his voice low.

'Aye. But fights aren't always won by the bigger numbers.'

'Course not.' Dogman worked his lips as he looked at all them men. 'Just mostly.' There was plenty going on down there, up at the front, shovels glinting, a ditch and an earth rampart taking shape, all across the valley.

'Doing some digging o' their own,' grunted Dow.

'Always was thorough, was Bethod,' said Dogman. 'Taking his time. Doing it right.'

Logen nodded. 'Make sure none of us get away.'

Dogman heard the sound of Crummock's laughter behind him. 'Getting away wasn't ever the purpose o' this, though, eh?'

Bethod's own standard was going up now, near to the back but still towering over the others. Huge great thing, red circle on black. Dogman frowned at it, flapping in the breeze. He remembered seeing it months ago, back in Angland. Back when Threetrees had still been alive, and Cathil too. He worked his tongue round his sour mouth.

'King o' the fucking Northmen,' he muttered.

A few men came out from the front, where they were digging, started walking up towards the wall. Five of 'em, all in good armour, the one at the front with his arms spread out wide.

'Jawing time,' muttered Dow, then gobbled down into the ditch. They came up close, the five, up in front of the patched-up gate, mail coats shining dull in the brightening sun. The first of 'em had long white hair and one white eye, and weren't too hard to remember. White-Eye Hansul. He looked older than he used to, but didn't they all? He'd been the one to ask Threetrees to surrender, at Uffrith, and been told to piss off. He'd had shit thrown down on him at Heonan. He'd offered duels to Black Dow, and to Tul Duru, and to Harding Grim. Duels against Bethod's champion. Duels against the Bloody-Nine. He'd done a lot of talking for Bethod, and he'd told a lot o' lies.

'That Shite-Eye Hansul down there?' jeered Black Daw at him. 'Still sucking on Bethod's cock, are you?'

The old warrior grinned up at them. 'Man's got to feed his family somehow, don't he, and one cock tastes pretty much like another, if you ask me! Don't pretend like your mouths ain't all tasted salty enough before!'

He had some kind of point there, the Dogman had to admit. They'd all fought for Bethod themselves, after all. 'What're you after, Hansul?' he shouted. 'Bethod want to surrender to us, does he?'

'You'd have thought so, wouldn't you, outnumbered like he is, but that's not why I'm here. He's ready to fight, just like always, but I'm more of a talker than a fighter, and I talked him into giving you all a chance. I got two sons down there, in with the rest, and call me selfish but I'd rather not have 'em in harm's way. I'm hoping we can maybe talk our way clear of this.'

'Don't seem too likely!' shouted Dogman, 'but give it a go if you must, I've got nothing else pressing on today!'

'Here's the thing, then! Bethod don't particularly want to waste time, and sweat, and blood on climbing your little shit-pile of a wall. He's got business with the Southerners he wants to get settled. It's scarcely worth the breath of pointing out the bastard of a fix you're in. We've got the numbers more'n ten to one, I reckon. Much more, and you've no way out. Bethod says any man wants to give up now can go in peace. All he has to do is give over his weapons.'

'And his head soon afterwards, eh?' barked Dow.

Hansul took a big breath in, like he hardly expected to be believed. 'Bethod says any man wants to can go free. That's his word.'

'Fuck his word!' Dow sneered at him, and down the walls men jeered and spat their support. 'D'you think we ain't all seen him break it ten times before? I done shits worth more!'

‘Lies, o’ course,’ chuckled Crummock, ‘but it’s traditional, no? To get a bit o’ lying done, before we get started on the hard work. You’d feel insulted if he didn’t give it some kind of a try at least. Any man, is it?’ he called down. ‘What about Crummock-i-Phail, can he go free? What about the Bloody-Nine?’

Hansul’s face sagged at the name. ‘It’s true then? Ninefingers is up there, is he?’

Dogman felt Logen come up beside and show himself on the wall. White-Eye turned pale, and his shoulders slumped. ‘Well,’ Dogman heard him saying quiet, ‘it has to be blood, then.’

Logen leaned lazily on the parapet, and he gave Hansul and his Carls a look. That hungry, empty look, like he was picking which one of a herd o’ sheep to slaughter first. ‘You can tell Bethod we’ll come out.’ He left a pause. ‘Once we’ve killed the fucking lot o’ you.’

A ripple of laughter went down the walls, and men jeered and shook their weapons in the air. Not funny words, particularly, but hard ones, which was what they all needed to hear, Dogman reckoned. Good way to get rid of their fear, for a moment. He even managed half a smile himself.

White-Eye just stood there, in front of their rickety gate, and he waited for the boys to go quiet. ‘I heard you was chief of this crowd now, Dogman. So you don’t have to take your orders from this blood-mad butcher no more. That your answer as well? That the way it is?’

Dogman shrugged. ‘Just what other way did you think it’d be? We didn’t come here to talk, Hansul. You can piss off back, now.’

Some more laughter, and some more cheers, and one lad down at Shivers’ end of the wall pulled his trousers down and stuck his bare arse over the parapet. So that was that for the negotiations.

White-Eye shook his head. ‘Alright, then. I’ll tell him. Back to the mud with the lot o’ you, I reckon, and well earned. You can tell the dead I tried, when you meet ‘em!’ He started picking his way back down the valley, the four Carls behind him.

Logen loomed forward, all of a sudden. ‘I’ll be looking for your sons, Hansul!’ he screamed, spit flying out his snarling, grinning mouth and away into the wind, ‘When the work begins! You can tell Bethod I’m waiting! Tell ‘em all I’ll be waiting!’

A strange stillness fell on the wall and the men upon it, on the valley and the men within it. That kind of stillness that comes sometimes, before a battle, when both sides know what to expect. The same stillness that Logen had felt at Carleon, before he drew his sword and roared for the charge. Before he lost his finger. Before he was the Bloody-Nine. Long ago, when things were simpler.

Bethod’s ditch was deep enough for him, and the Thralls had put away their shovels and moved behind it. The Dogman had climbed the steps back to the tower, no doubt taken up his bow beside Grim and Tul, and was waiting. Crummock was behind the wall with his Hillmen, lined up fierce and ready. Dow was with his lads on the left. Red Hat was with his boys on the right.

Shivers wasn't far from Logen, both of them stood above the gate, waiting.

The standards down in the valley flapped and rustled gently in the wind. A hammer clanged once, twice, three times in the fortress behind them. A bird called, high above. A man whispered, somewhere, then was still. Logen closed his eyes, and tipped his face back, and he felt the hot sun and the cool breeze of the High Places on his skin. All as quiet as if he'd been alone, and there were no ten thousand men about him eager to set to killing one another. So still, and calm, he almost smiled. Was this what life would have been, if he'd never held a blade?

For the length of three breaths or so, Logen Ninefingers was a man of peace.

Then he heard the sound of men moving, and he opened his eyes. Bethod's Carls shuffled to the sides of the valley, rank after rank of them, with a crunching of feet and a rattling of gear. They left a rocky path, an open space through their midst. Out of that gap black shapes came, swarming over the ditch like angry ants from a broken nest, boiling up the slope towards the wall in a formless mass of twisted limbs, and snarling mouths and scraping claws.

Shanka, and even Logen had never seen half so many in one place. The valley crawled with them – a gibbering, clattering, squawking infestation.

'By the fucking dead,' someone whispered.

Logen wondered if he should shout something to the men on the walls around him. If he should cry, 'Steady!', or 'Hold!'. Something to help put some heart in his lads, the way a leader was meant to. But what would have been the point? Every one of them had fought before and knew his business. Every one of them knew that it was fight or die, and there was no better spur to a man's courage than that.

So Logen gritted his teeth, and he curled his fingers tight round the cold grip of the Maker's sword, and he slid the dull metal from its scarred sheath, and he watched the Flatheads come. A hundred strides away now, maybe, the front runners, and coming on fast.

'Ready your bows!' roared Logen.

'Bows!' echoed Shivers.

'Arrows!' came Dow's harsh scream from down the wall, and Red Hat's bellow from the other side. All around Logen the bows creaked as they were drawn, men taking their aim, jaws clenched, faces grim and dirty. The Flatheads came on, heedless, teeth shining, tongues lolling, bitter eyes bright with hate. Soon, now, very soon. Logen spun the grip of the sword round in his hand.

'Soon,' he whispered.



'Start fucking shooting, then!' And the Dogman loosed his shaft into the crowd of Shanka. Strings buzzed all round him and the first volley went hissing down. Arrows missed their marks, bounced off rock and spun away, arrows found their marks and brought Flatheads squealing down in a tangle of black limbs. Men reached for more, calm and solid, the best archers in the whole

crew and knowing it.

Bows clicked and shafts twittered and Shanka died down in the valley, and the archers took aim, nice and easy, loosing 'em off and on to the next. Dogman heard the order from down below and he saw the twitch and flicker of shafts flying from the walls. More Flatheads dropped, thrashing and struggling in the dirt.

'Easy as squashing ants in a bowl!' someone shouted.

'Aye!' growled the Dogman, 'except ants won't climb up out of that bowl and cut your fucking head off! Less talk and more arrows!' He watched the first Shanka come up to their fresh-dug ditch, start floundering in, trying to drag the stakes down, scrabbling about at the bottom of the wall.

Tul heaved a great stone up over his head, leaned out and flung it spinning down with a roar. Dogman saw it crash into a Shanka's head below in the ditch and dash its brains out, red against the rocks, saw it bounce and tumble into others, send a couple reeling. More fell, screeching as shafts flitted down into them, but there were plenty behind, sliding into the ditch, swarming over each other. They crushed up to the wall, spreading out down its length, a few of them hurling spears up at the men on top, or shooting clumsy arrows.

Now they were starting to climb, claws digging into pitted stone, hauling themselves up, and up. Slow across most of the wall, and getting torn off by rocks and arrows from above. Quicker on the far side, over on the left, furthest from the Dogman and his boys, where Black Dow had the watch. Even quicker round the gate, where there was still some ivy stuck to the stone.

'Damn it, but those bastards can climb!' hissed the Dogman, fumbling out his next shaft.

'Uh,' grunted Grim.

The Shanka's hand slapped down on the top of the parapet, a twisted claw, scratching at the stones. Logen watched the arm come after, bent and ugly, patched with thick hair and squirming with thick sinew. Now came the flattened top of its bald head, a hulking lump of heavy brow, great jaw yawning wide, sharp teeth slick with spit. The deep set eyes met his. Logen's sword split its skull down to its flat stub of nose and popped one eye from its socket.

Men shot arrows and ducked down as arrows bounced from stone. A spear went twittering past over Logen's head. Down below he could hear the Shanka scratching and tearing at the gates, beating at them with clubs and hammers, could hear them shrieking with rage. Shanka hissed and squawked as they tried to pull themselves over the parapet and men hacked at them with sword and axe, poked them off the wall with spears.

He could hear Shivers roaring, 'Get 'em away from the gate! Away from the gate!' Men bellowed curses. One Carl who'd been leaning out over the parapet fell back, coughing. He had a Shanka's spear through him, just under his shoulder, the point making the shirt stick right up off his back. He blinked down at the warped shaft, opened his mouth to say something. He groaned, took a couple of wobbling steps, and a big Flathead started dragging itself

over the parapet behind him, its arm stretched out on the stone.

The Maker's sword chopped deep into it just below the elbow, spattering sticky spots across Logen's face. The blade caught stone and made his hand sing, sent him stumbling long enough for the Shanka to drag itself over, its flopping arm only just held on by a flap of skin and sinew, dark blood drooling out in long spurts.

It came for Logen with its other claw but he caught its wrist, kicked its knee sideways and brought it down. Before it could get up he'd chopped a long gash out of its back, splinters of white bone showing in the great wound. It thrashed and struggled, splattering blood around, and Logen caught it tight under the throat, heaved it back over the wall and flung it off. It fell, and crashed into another just starting to climb. Both of them went sprawling in the ditch, one scrabbling around with a broken stake in its throat.

A young lad stood there, gawping, bow hanging limp from his hand.

'Did I tell you to stop fucking shooting?' Logen roared at him, and he blinked and knocked a shaft with a trembling hand, hurried back to the parapet. There were men everywhere fighting, and shouting, shooting arrows and swinging blades. He saw three Carls stabbing at a Flathead with their spears. He saw Shivers plant a blow in the small of another's back, blood leaping in the air in dark streaks. He saw a man smash a Flathead in the face with his shield, just as it got to the top of the wall, and knock it into the empty air. Logen slashed at a Shanka's hand, slipped in some blood and fell on his side, nearly stabbed himself. He crawled a stride or two and fumbled his way up. He hacked a Shanka's arm off that was already spitted thrashing on a Carl's spear, chopped halfway through another's neck as it showed itself over the parapet. He lurched after it and stared over.

One Shanka was still on the wall, and Logen was just pointing to it when an arrow from off the tower took it in the back. It crashed down into the ditch, stuck on a stake. The ones round the gate were all done, crushed with rocks and bristling with broken arrows. That was it for the centre, and Red Hat's side was already clear. Over on the left there were still a few up on the walls, but Dow's boys were getting well on top of them now. Even as Logen watched he saw a couple flung down bloody into the ditch.

In the valley they started wavering, edging away, squeaking and shrieking, arrows still falling among them from the Dogman's archers. Seemed that even Shanka could have enough. They started to turn, to scuttle back towards Bethod's ditch.

'We done 'em!' someone bellowed, and then everyone was cheering and screaming. The boy with the bow was waving it over his head now, grinning like he'd beaten Bethod all by himself.

Logen didn't celebrate. He frowned out at the great crowd of Carls beyond the ditch, the standards of Bethod's host flapping over them in the breeze. Brief and bloody, that one might have been, but the next time they came it was likely to be a lot less brief, and a lot more bloody. He made his aching fist uncurl from round the Maker's sword, leaned it up against the parapet, and he pressed one hand with the other to stop them shaking. He took a long breath.

'Still alive,' he whispered.

Logen sat sharpening his knives, the firelight flashing on the blades as he turned them this way and that, stroking them with the whetstone, licking his fingertip and wiping a smudge away, getting them nice and clean. You could never have too many, and that was a fact. He grinned as he remembered what Ferro's answer to that had been. Unless you fall into a river and drown for all that weight of iron. He wondered for an idle moment if he'd ever see her again, but it didn't look likely. You have to be realistic, after all, and getting through tomorrow seemed like quite the ambition.

Grim sat opposite, trimming some straight sticks to use as arrow shafts. There'd still been the slightest glimmer of dusk in the sky when they'd sat down together. Now it was dark as pitch but for the dusty stars, and neither one of them had said a word the whole time. That was Harding Grim for you, and it suited Logen well enough. A comfortable silence was much preferable to a worrisome conversation, but nothing lasts forever.

The sound of angry footsteps came out of the darkness and Black Dow stalked up to the fire, Tul and Crummock just behind him. He had a frown on his face black enough to have earned his name, and a dirty bandage round his forearm, a long streak of dark blood dried into it.

'Pick up a cut, did you?' asked Logen.

'Bah!' Dow dropped down beside the fire. 'Nothing but a scratch. Fucking Flatheads! I'll burn the lot of 'em!'

'How about the rest of you?'

Tul grinned. 'My palms are terrible chafed from hefting rocks, but I'm a tough bastard. I'll live through it.'

'And I still find myself miserably idle,' said Crummock, 'with my children looking to my weapons, and cutting arrows from the dead. Good work for children, that, gets 'em comfortable round a corpse. The moon's keen to see me fight, though, so she is, and so am I.'

Logen sucked at his teeth. 'You'll get your chance, Crummock, I'd not worry about that. Bethod's got plenty for everyone, I reckon.'

'I never seen Flatheads come on like that,' Dow was musing. 'Right at a well-manned wall with no ladders, no tools. It ain't too clever, your Flathead, but it ain't stupid either. They like ambushes. They like cover, and hiding, and creeping around. They can be mad fearless, when they have to be, but to come on like that, by choice? Not natural.'

Crummock chuckled, a great raspy rumbling. 'Shanka fighting for one set of men against another ain't natural either. These aren't natural times. Might be Bethod's witch has worked some charm to get 'em all stirred up. Cooked herself a chant and a ritual to fill those things with hate of us.'

'Danced naked round a green fire and all the rest, I don't doubt,' said Tul.

'The moon will see us right, my friends, don't worry yourself on that score!' Crummock rattled the bones around his neck. 'The moon loves us all, and we cannot die while there's—'

'Tell it to those as went back to the mud today.' Logen jerked his head over towards the fresh dug graves at the back of the fortress. There was no seeing them in the darkness, but they were there. A score or so long humps of turned and pressed-down earth.

But the big hillman only smiled. 'I'd call them the happy ones, though, wouldn't you? Least they all get their own beds, don't they? We'll be lucky if we don't go in pits for a dozen each once the work gets hot. There'll be nowhere for the living to sleep otherwise. Pits for a score! Don't tell me you ain't seen that before, or dug the holes your own sweet self.'

Logen got up. 'Maybe I have, but I didn't like it any.'

'Course you did!' Crummock roared after him. 'Don't give me that, Bloody-Nine!'

Logen didn't look back. There were torches set on the wall, every ten paces or so, bright flames in the darkness, white specks of insects floating around them. Men stood in their light, leaning on their spears, bows clenched in their hands, swords drawn, watching the night for surprises. Bethod had always loved surprises, and Logen reckoned they'd have some before they were through, one way or another.

He came up to the parapet and set his hands on the clammy stone, frowned down at the fires burning in the blackness of the valley. Bethod's fires, far away in the dark, and their own ones, bonfires built up and lit just below the wall to try and catch any clever bastards trying to sneak up. They cast flickering circles across the shadowy rocks, with here or there the twisted corpse of a Flathead, hacked and flung from the wall or stuck with arrows.

Logen felt someone move behind him and his back prickled, eyes sliding to the corners. Shivers, maybe, come to settle their score and shove him off the wall. Shivers, or one of a hundred others with some grudge that Logen had forgotten but they never would. He made sure his hand was close to a blade, and he bared his teeth, and he made ready to spin and strike.

'We did good today, though, eh?' said the Dogman. 'Lost less than twenty.'

Logen breathed easy again, and he let his hand drop. 'We did alright. But Bethod's just getting started. He's prodding, to see where we're weakest, see if he can wear us down. He knows that time's the thing. Most valuable thing there is, in war. A day or two's worth more to him than a load of Flatheads. If he can crush us quick he'll take the losses, I reckon.'

'Best thing might be to hold out, then, eh?'

Off in the darkness, far away and echoing, Logen could just hear the clang and clatter of smithing and carpentry. 'They're building down there. All the stuff they'll need to climb our wall, fill in our ditch. Lots of ladders, and all the rest. He'll take us quick if he can, Bethod, but he'll take us slow if he has to.'

Dogman nodded. 'Well, like I said. Best thing to do would be to hold out. If all goes to plan, the Union'll be here soon.'

'They'd better be. Plans have a way of coming apart when you lean on 'em.'

Such Sweet Sorrow

‘His Resplendence, the Grand Duke of Ospria, desires only the best of relations . . .’

Jezal could do little but sit and smile, as he had been sitting and smiling all the whole interminable day. His face, and his rump, were aching from it. The burbling of the ambassador continued unabated, accompanied by flamboyant hand gestures. Occasionally he would dam the river of blather for a moment, so that his translator could render his platitudes into the common tongue. He need scarcely have bothered.

‘. . . the great city of Ospria was always honoured to count herself among the closest friends of your illustrious father, King Guslav, and now seeks nothing more than the continuing friendship of the government and people of the Union . . .’

Jezal had sat and smiled through the long morning, in his bejewelled chair, on his high marble dais, as the ambassadors of the world came to pay their ingratiating respects. He had sat as the sun rose in the sky and poured mercilessly through the vast windows, glinting on the gilt mouldings that encrusted every inch of wall and ceiling, flashing from the great mirrors, and silver candlesticks, and grand vases, striking multi-coloured fire from the tinkling glass beads on the three monstrous chandeliers.

‘. . . the Grand Duke wishes once again to express his brotherly regret at the minor incident last spring, and assures you that nothing of the kind will happen again, provided the soldiers of Westport stay on their side of the border . . .’

He had sat through the endless afternoon as the room grew hotter and hotter, squirming as the representatives of the world’s great leaders bowed in and scraped out with identical bland congratulations in a dozen different languages. He had sat as the sun went down, and hundreds of candles were lit and hoisted up, twinkling at him from the mirrors, and the darkened windows, and the highly polished floor. He sat, smiling, and receiving praise from men whose countries he had scarcely even heard of before that endless day began.

‘. . . His Resplendence furthermore hopes and trusts that the hostilities between your great nation and the Empire of Gurkhul may soon come to an end, and that trade may once more flow freely around the Circle Sea.’

Both ambassador and translator paused politely for a rare instant and Jezal managed to stir himself into sluggish speech. ‘We have a similar hope. Please convey to the Grand Duke our thanks for the wonderful gift.’ Two lackeys, meanwhile, heaved the huge chest to one side and placed it with the rest of the gaudy rubbish Jezal had accumulated that day.

Further Styrian chatter flowed out into the room. ‘His Resplendence wishes to convey his heartfelt congratulations on your August Majesty’s forthcoming marriage to the Princess Terez, the Jewel of Talins, surely the greatest beauty

alive in all the wide Circle of the World.' Jezal could only fight to maintain his stretched grin. He had heard the match spoken of as a settled thing so often that day that he had lost the will to correct the misconception, and had in fact almost started to think of himself as engaged. All he cared about was that the audiences should finally be finished with, so he might steal a moment to drown himself in peace.

'His Resplendence has further instructed us to wish your August Majesty a long and happy reign,' explained the translator, 'and many heirs, that your line may continue undiminished in glory.' Jezal forced his smile a tooth wider, and inclined his head. 'I bid you good evening!'

The Osprian ambassador bowed with a theatrical flourish, sweeping off his enormous hat, its multicoloured feathers thrashing with enthusiasm. Then he shuffled backwards, still bent over, across the gleaming floor. He somehow made it out into the corridor without pitching over on his back, and the great doors, festooned with gold leaf, were smoothly shut upon him.

Jezal snatched the crown from his head and tossed it onto the cushion beside the throne, rubbing at the chafe marks round his sweaty scalp with one hand while he tugged his embroidered collar open with the other. Nothing helped. He still felt dizzy, weak, oppressively hot.

Hoff was already ingratiating himself onto Jezal's left side. 'That was the last of the ambassadors, your Majesty. Tomorrow will be occupied by the nobility of Midderland. They are eager to pay homage—'

'Lots of homage and little help, I'll be bound!'

Hoff managed a chuckle of suffocating falseness. 'Ha, ha, ha, your Majesty. They have sought audiences from dawn, and we would not wish to offend them by—'

'Damn it!' hissed Jezal, jumping up and shaking his legs in a vain effort to unstick his trousers from his sweaty backside. He jerked his crimson sash over his head and flung it away, tore his gilded frock coat open and tried to rip it off, but in the end he got his hand caught in one cuff and had to turn the bloody thing inside out before he could finally get free of it.

'Damn it!' He hurled it down on the marble dais with half a mind to stamp it to rags. Then he remembered himself. Hoff had taken a cautious step back, and was frowning as if he had discovered his fine new mansion was afflicted with a terrible case of rot. The assorted servants, pages, and Knights, both Herald and of the Body, were all staring studiously ahead, doing their best to imitate statues. Over in the dark corner of the room, Bayaz was standing. His eyes were sunk in shadow, but his face was stony grim.

Jezal blushed like a naughty schoolboy called to account, and pressed one hand over his eyes, 'A terribly trying day . . .' He hurried down the steps of the dais and out of the audience chamber with his head down. The blaring of a belated and slightly off-key fanfare pursued him down the hallway. So, unfortunately, did the First of the Magi.

'That was not gracious,' said Bayaz. 'Rare rages render a man frightening. Common ones render him ridiculous.'

'I apologise,' growled Jezal through gritted teeth. 'The crown is a mighty burden.'

'A mighty burden and a mighty honour both. We had a discussion, as I

recall, about your striving to be worthy of it.' The Magus left a significant pause. 'Perhaps you might strive harder.'

Jezal rubbed at his aching temples. 'I just need a moment to myself is all. Just a moment.'

'Take all the time you need. But we have business in the morning, your Majesty, business we cannot avoid. The nobility of Midderland will not wait to congratulate you. I will see you at dawn, brimful with energy and enthusiasm, I am sure.'

'Yes, yes!' Jezal snapped over his shoulder. 'Brimful!'

He burst out into a small courtyard, surrounded on three sides by a shadowy colonnade, and stood still in the cool evening. He shook himself, squeezed his eyes shut, let his head tip back and took a long, slow breath. A minute alone. He wondered if, aside from pissing or sleeping, it was the first he had been permitted since that day of madness in the Lords' Round.

He was the victim, or perhaps the beneficiary, of the most almighty blunder. Somehow, everyone had mistaken him for a king, when he was very clearly a selfish, clueless idiot who had scarcely in his life thought more than a day ahead. Every time someone called him, 'your Majesty' he felt more of a fraud, and with each moment that passed he was more guiltily surprised not to have been found out.

He wandered across the perfect lawn, giving vent to a long, self-pitying sigh. It caught in his throat. There was a Knight of the Body beside a doorway opposite, standing to attention so rigidly that Jezal had hardly noticed him. He cursed under his breath. Could he not be left alone for five minutes together? He frowned as he walked closer. The man seemed somehow familiar. A great big fellow with a shaved head and a noticeable lack of neck .

..

'Bremer dan Gorst!'

'Your Majesty,' said Gorst, his armour rattling as he clashed his meaty fist against his polished breastplate.

'It is a pleasure to see you!' Jezal had disliked the man from the first moment he had laid eyes on him, and being bludgeoned round a fencing circle by him, whether Jezal had won in the end or no, had not improved his opinion of the neckless brute. Now, however, anything resembling a familiar face was like a glass of water in the desert. Jezal actually found himself reaching out and squeezing the man's heavy hand as though they were old friends, and had to make himself let go of it.

'Your Majesty does me too much honour.'

'Please, you need not call me that! How did you come to be part of the household? I thought that you served with Lord Brock's guard?'

'That post did not suit me,' said Gorst in his strangely high, piping voice. 'I was lucky enough to find a place with the Knights of the Body some months ago, your Maj—' He cut himself off.

An idea slunk into Jezal's head. He looked over his shoulder, but there was no one else nearby. The garden was still as a graveyard, its shadowy arcades as quiet as crypts. 'Bremer . . . I may call you Bremer, may I?'

'I suppose that my king may call me whatever he wishes.'

'I wonder . . . could I ask you for a favour?'

Gorst blinked. 'Your Majesty has only to ask.'

Jeza! spun around as he heard the door open. Gorst stepped out into the colonnade with the soft jingle of armour. A cloaked and hooded figure followed him, silently. The old excitement was still there as she pushed back her hood and a chink of light from a window above crept across the lower part of her face. He could see the bright curve of her cheek, one side of her mouth, the outline of a nostril, the gleam of her eyes in the shadows, and that was all.

'Thank you, Gorst,' said Jeza!. 'You may leave us.' The big man thumped his chest and backed through the archway, pulling the door to behind him. Hardly the first time they had met in secret, of course, but things were different now. He wondered if it would end with kisses and soft words between them, or if it would simply end. The start was far from promising.

'Your August Majesty,' said Ardee with the very heaviest of irony. 'What a towering honour. Should I grovel on my face? Or do I curtsy?'

However hard her words, the sound of her voice still made the breath catch in his throat. 'Curtsy?' he managed to say. 'Do you even know how?'

'In truth, not really. I have not had the training for polite society, and now the lack of it quite crushes me.' She stepped forward, frowning into the darkened garden. 'When I was a girl, in my wildest flights of fancy, I used to dream of being invited to the palace, a guest of the king himself. We would eat fine cakes, and drink fine wine, and talk fine talk of important things, deep into the night.' Ardee pressed her hands to her chest and fluttered her eyelashes. 'Thank you for making the pitiful dreams of one poor wretch come true, if only for the briefest moment. The other beggars will never believe me when I tell them!'

'We are all more than a little shocked by the turn events have taken.'

'Oh, we are indeed, your Majesty.'

Jeza! flinched. 'Don't call me that. Not you.'

'What should I call you?'

'My name. Jeza!, that is. The way you used to . . . please.'

'If I must. You promised me, Jeza!. You promised me you would not let me down.'

'I know I did, and I meant to keep my promise . . . but the fact is . . .' King or not, he fumbled with the words as much as he ever had, then blurted them out in an idiotic spurt. 'I cannot marry you! I surely would have done, had not . . .' He raised his arms and hopelessly let them drop. 'Had not all this happened. But it has happened, and there is nothing that I can do. I cannot marry you.'

'Of course not.' Her mouth gave a bitter twist. 'Promises are for children. I never thought it very likely, even before. Even in my most unrealistic moments. Now the notion seems ridiculous. The king and the peasant-girl. Absurd. The most hackneyed story-book would never dare suggest it.'

'It need not mean that we never see each other again.' He took a hesitant step towards her. 'Things will be different, of course, but we can still find moments . . .' He reached out, slowly, awkwardly. 'Moments when we can be

together.' He touched her face, gently, and felt the same guilty thrill he always had. 'We can be to each other just as we were. You would not need to worry. Everything would be taken care of . . .'

She looked him in the eye. 'So . . . you'd like me to be your whore?'

He jerked his hand back. 'No! Of course not! I mean . . . I would like you to be . . .'

What did he mean? He fumbled desperately for a better word. 'My lover?'

'Ah. I see. And when you take a wife, what will I be then? What word do you think your queen might use to describe me?' Jezal swallowed, and looked at his shoes. 'A whore is still a whore, whatever word you use. Easily tired of, and even more easily replaced. And when you tire of me, and you find other lovers? What will they call me then?' She gave a bitter snort. 'I'm scum, and I know it, but you must think even less of me than I do.'

'It's not my fault.' He felt tears in his eyes. Pain, or relief, it was hard to tell. A bitter alloy of both, perhaps. 'It's not my fault.'

'Of course it isn't. I don't blame you. I blame myself. I used to think I had bad luck, but my brother was right. I make bad choices.' She looked at him with that same judging expression in her dark eyes that she had when they first met. 'I could have found a good man, but I chose you. I should have known better.' She reached up and touched his face, rubbed a tear from his cheek with her thumb. Just as she had when they parted before, in the park, in the rain. But then there had been the hope that they would meet again. Now there was none. She sighed, and let her arm drop, and stared sulkily out into the garden.

Jezal blinked. Could that really be all? He yearned to say some last tender word, at least, some bitter-sweet farewell, but his mind was empty. What words could there possibly be that could make any difference? They were done, and more talk would only have been salt in the cuts. Wasted breath. He set his jaw, and wiped the last damp streaks from his face. She was right. The king and the peasant-girl. What could have been more ridiculous?

'Gorst!' he barked. The door squealed open and the muscle-bound guardsman emerged from the shadows, his head humbly bowed. 'You may escort the lady back to her home.'

He nodded, and stood away from the dark archway. Ardee turned and walked towards it, pulling up her hood, and Jezal watched her go. He wondered if she would pause on the threshold and look back, and their eyes would meet, and there would be one last moment between them. One last catching of his breath. One last tugging at his heart.

But she did not look back. Without the slightest pause she stepped through and was gone, and Gorst after her, and Jezal was left in the moonlit garden. Alone.

Picked Up A Shadow

Ferro sat on the warehouse roof, her eyes narrowed against the bright sun, her legs crossed underneath her. She watched the boats, and the people flowing off them. She watched for Yulwei. That was why she came here every day.

There was war between the Union and Gurkhul, a meaningless war with a lot of talk and no fighting, and so no ships went to Kanta. But Yulwei went where he pleased. He could take her back to the South, so she could have her vengeance on the Gurkish. Until he came, she was trapped with the pinks. She ground her teeth, and clenched her fists, and grimaced at her own uselessness. Her boredom. Her wasted time. She would have prayed to God for Yulwei to come.

But God never listened.

Jezal dan Luthar, fool that he was, for reasons she could not comprehend, had been given a crown and made king. Bayaz, who Ferro was sure had been behind the whole business, now spent every hour with him. Still trying to make him a leader of men, no doubt. Just as he had all the long way across the plain and back, with small results.

Jezal dan Luthar, the King of the Union. Ninefingers would have laughed long and hard at that, if he could have heard it. Ferro smiled to think of him laughing. Then she realised that she was smiling, and made herself stop. Bayaz had promised her vengeance, and given her nothing, and left her mired here, powerless. There was nothing to smile at.

She sat, and watched the boats for Yulwei.

She did not watch for Ninefingers. She did not hope to see him slouch onto the docks. That would have been a foolish, childish hope, belonging to the foolish child she had been when the Gurkish took her for a slave. He would not change his mind and come back. She had made sure of it. Strange, though, how she kept thinking that she saw him, in amongst the crowds.

The dockers had come to recognise her. They had shouted at her, for a while. 'Come down here, my lovely, and give me a kiss!' one of them had called, and his friends had laughed. Then Ferro had thrown half a brick at his head and knocked him in the sea. He had nothing to say to her once they fished him out. None of them had, and that suited her well enough.

She sat, and watched the boats.

She sat until the sun was low, casting a bright glare across the bottoms of the clouds, making the shifting waves sparkle. Until the crowds thinned out, and the carts stopped moving, and the shouting and bustle of the docks faded to a dusty quiet. Until the breeze grew cool against her skin.

Yulwei was not coming today.

She climbed down from the roof of the warehouse and worked her way through the back streets towards the Middleway. It was as she was walking down that wide road, scowling at the people who passed her, that she realised.

She was being followed.

He did it well, and carefully. Sometimes closer, sometimes further back. Staying out of plain sight, but never hiding. She took a few turns to make sure, and he always followed. He was dressed all in black, with long, lank hair and a mask covering part of his face. All in black, like a shadow. Like the men that had chased her and Ninefingers, before they left for the Old Empire. She watched him out of the corners of her eyes, never looking straight at him, never letting him know that she knew.

He would find out soon enough.

She took a turn down a dingy alley, stopped and waited behind the corner. Pressed up against the grimy stonework, holding her breath. Her bow and her sword might be far away, but shock was the only weapon she needed. That and her hands, and her feet, and her teeth.

She heard the footsteps coming. Careful footsteps, padding down the alley, so soft she could barely hear them. She found that she was smiling. It felt good to have an enemy, to have a purpose. Very good, after so long without one. It filled the empty space inside her, even if it was only for a moment. She gritted her teeth, feeling the fury swelling up in her chest. Hot and exciting. Safe and familiar. Like the kiss of an old lover, much missed.

When he rounded the corner her fist was already swinging. It crunched into his mask and sent him reeling. She pressed in close, cracking him in the face with each hand and knocking his head right and left. He fumbled for a knife, but he was slow and dizzy and the blade was barely out of its sheath before she had his wrist tight. Her elbow snapped his head back, jabbed into his throat and left him gurgling. She tore the knife out of his limp hand, spun around and kicked him in the gut so he bent over. Her knee thudded into his mask and sent him onto his back in the dirt. She followed him down, her legs wrapping tight around his waist, her arm across his chest, his own knife pressed up against his throat.

‘Look at this,’ she whispered in his face. ‘I have picked up a shadow.’

‘Glugh,’ came from behind his mask, his eyes still rolling.

‘Hard to talk with that on, eh?’ And she slashed the straps of his mask with a jerk of the knife, the blade leaving a long scratch down his cheek. He did not look so dangerous without it. Much younger than she had thought, with a rash of spots around his chin and a growth of downy hair on his top lip. He jerked his head and his eyes came back into focus. He snarled, tried to twist free, but she had him fast, and a touch of the knife against his neck soon calmed him.

‘Why are you following me?’

‘I’m not fucking—’

Ferro had never been a patient woman. Straddling her shadow as she was it was an easy thing to rear up and smash her elbow into his face. He did his best to ward her off, but all her weight was on his hips and he was helpless. Her arm crashed through his hands and into his mouth, his nose, his cheek, cracking his head back against the greasy cobbles. Four of those and the fight was out of him. His head lolled back, and she crouched down over him again and tucked the knife up under his neck. Blood bubbled out of his nose and his mouth and ran down the side of his face in dark streaks.

‘Following me now?’

'I just watch.' His voice clicked in his bloody mouth. 'I just watch. I don't give the orders.'

The Gurmish soldiers did not give the orders to kill Ferro's people and make her a slave. That did not make them innocent. That did not make them safe from her. 'Who does?'

He coughed, and his face twitched, bubbles of blood blew out of his swollen nostrils. Nothing else. Ferro frowned.

'What?' She moved the knife down and pricked at his thigh with the point, 'you think I never cut a cock off before?'

'Glokta,' he mumbled, closing his eyes. 'I work . . . for Glokta.'

'Glokta.' The name meant nothing to her, but it was something to follow.

She slid the knife back up, up to his neck. The lump on his throat rose and fell, brushing against the edge of the blade. She clenched her jaw, and worked her fingers round the grip, frowning down. Tears had started to glitter in the corners of his eyes. Best to get it done, and away. Safest. But her hand was hard to move.

'Give me a reason not to do it.'

The tears welled up and ran down the sides of his bloody face. 'My birds,' he whispered.

'Birds?'

'There'll be no one to feed them. I deserve it, sure enough, but my birds . . . they've done nothing.' She narrowed her eyes at him.

Birds. Strange, the things that people have to live for.

Her father had kept a bird. She remembered it, in a cage, hanging from a pole. A useless thing, that could not even fly, only cling to a twig. He had taught it words. She remembered watching him feeding it, when she was a child. Long ago, before the Gurmish came.

'Ssssss,' she hissed in his face, pressing the knife up against his neck and making him cower. Then she pulled the blade away, got up and stood over him. 'The moment when I see you again will be your last. Back to your birds, shadow.'

He nodded, his wet eyes wide, and she turned and stalked off down the dark alleyway, into the dusk. When she crossed a bridge she tossed the knife away. It vanished with a splash, and ripples spread out in growing circles across the slimy water. A mistake, most likely, to have left that man alive. Mercy was always a mistake, in her experience.

But it seemed she was in a merciful mood today.

Questions

Colonel Glokta was a magnificent dancer, of course, but with his leg feeling as stiff as it did it was difficult for him to truly shine. The constant buzzing of flies was a further distraction, and his partner was not helping. Ardee West looked well enough, but her constant giggling was becoming quite the irritation.

‘Stop that!’ snapped the Colonel, whirling her around the laboratory of the Adeptus Physical, the specimens in the jars pulsing and wobbling in time to the music.

‘Partially eaten,’ grinned Kandelau, one eye enormously magnified through his eyeglass. He pointed downwards with his tongs. ‘This is a foot.’

Glokta pushed the bushes aside, one hand pressed over his face. The butchered corpse lay there, glistening red, scarcely recognisable as human. Ardee laughed and laughed at the sight of it. ‘Partially eaten!’ she tittered at him. Colonel Glokta did not find the business in any way amusing. The sound of flies was growing louder and louder, threatening to drown out the music entirely. Worse yet, it was getting terribly cold in the park.

‘Careless of me,’ said a voice from behind.

‘How do you mean?’

‘Just to leave it there. But sometimes it is better to move quickly, than to move carefully, eh, cripple?’

‘I remember this,’ murmured Glokta. It had grown colder yet, and he was shivering like a leaf. ‘I remember this!’

‘Of course,’ whispered the voice. A woman’s voice, but not Ardee. A low and hissing voice, that made his eye twitch.

‘What can I do?’ The Colonel could feel his gorge rising. The wounds in the red meat yawned. The flies were so loud he could hardly hear the reply.

‘Perhaps you should go to the University, and ask for advice.’ Icy breath brushed his neck and made his back shiver. ‘Perhaps while you are there . . . you could ask them about the Seed.’



Glokta lurched to the bottom of the steps and staggered sideways, falling back against the wall, the breath hissing over his wet tongue. His left leg trembled, his left eye twitched, as though the two were connected by a cord of pain that cut into his arse, guts, back, shoulder, neck, face, and tightened with every movement, however small.

He forced himself to be still. To breathe long and slow. He made his mind move off the pain and on to other things. *Like Bayaz, and his failed quest for this Seed. After all, his Eminence is waiting, and is not known for his patience.* He

stretched his neck out to either side and felt the bones clicking between his twisted shoulder-blades. He pressed his tongue into his gums and shuffled away from the steps, into the cool darkness of the stacks.

They had not changed much in the past year. *Or probably in a few centuries before that.* The vaulted spaces smelled of fust and age, lit only by a couple of flickering, grimy lamps, sagging shelves stretching away into the shifting shadows. *Time to go digging once again through the dusty refuse of history.* The Adeptus Historical did not appear to have changed much either. He sat at his stained desk, poring over a mouldy-looking pile of papers in the light from a single squirming candle flame. He squinted up as Glokta hobbled closer.

‘Who’s there?’

‘Glokta.’ He peered up suspiciously towards the shadowy ceiling. ‘What happened to your crow?’

‘Dead,’ grunted the ancient librarian sadly.

‘History, you might say!’ The old man did not laugh. ‘Ah, well. It happens to us all.’ *And some sooner than others.* ‘I have questions for you.’

The Adeptus Historical craned forward over his desk, peering dewily up at Glokta as though he had never seen another human before. ‘I remember you.’ *Miracles do happen, then?* ‘You asked me about Bayaz. First apprentice of great Juvens, first letter in the alphabet of the—’

‘Yes, yes, we’ve been over this.’

The old man gave a sulky frown. ‘Did you bring that scroll back?’

‘The Maker fell burning, and so on? I’m afraid not. The Arch Lector has it.’

‘Gah. I hear far too much about that man these days. Them upstairs are always carping on him. His Eminence this, and his Eminence that. I’m sick of hearing it!’ *I know very much how you feel.* ‘Everyone’s in a spin, these days. A spin and a ruckus.’

‘Lots of changes upstairs. We have a new king.’

‘I know that! Guslav, is it?’

Glokta gave a long sigh as he settled himself in the chair on the other side of the desk. ‘Yes, yes, he’s the one.’ *Only thirty years out of date, or so. I’m surprised he didn’t think Harod the Great was still on the throne.*

‘What do you want this time?’

Oh, to fumble in the darkness for answers that are always just out of reach. ‘I want to know about the Seed.’

The lined face did not move. ‘The what?’

‘It was mentioned in your precious scroll. That thing that Bayaz and his magical friends searched for in the House of the Maker, after the death of Kanedias. After the death of Juvens.’

‘Bah!’ The Adeptus waved his hand, the saggy flesh under his wrist wobbling. ‘Secrets, power. It’s all a metaphor.’

‘Bayaz does not seem to think so.’ Glokta shuffled his chair closer, and spoke lower. *Though there cannot be anyone to hear, or to care if they did.* ‘I heard it was a piece of the Other Side, left over from the Old Time, when devils walked our earth. The stuff of magic, made solid.’

The old man wheezed with papery laughter, displaying a rotten cavern of a mouth with fewer teeth even than Glokta’s own. ‘I did not take you for a superstitious man, Superior.’ *Nor was I one, when I last came here with questions.*

Before my visit to the House of the Maker, before my meeting with Yulwei, before I saw Shickel smile while they burned her. What happy times they were, before I had heard of Bayaz, when things still made sense. The Adeptus wiped his runny eyes with his palsied mockery of a hand. 'Where did you hear that?'

Oh, from a Navigator with his foot on an anvil. 'Never you mind from where.'

'Well, you know more about it than me. I read once that rocks sometimes fall out of the sky. Some say they are fragments of the stars. Some say they are splinters, flung out from the chaos of hell. Dangerous to touch. Terribly cold.'

Cold? Gloкта could almost feel that icy breath upon his neck, and he wriggled his shoulders at it, forcing himself not to glance behind him. 'Tell me about hell.' *Though I think I already know more than most on the subject.*

'Eh?'

'Hell, old man. The Other Side.'

'They say it is where magic comes from, if you believe in such things.'

'I have learned to keep an open mind on the subject.'

'An open mind is like to an open wound, apt to—'

'So I have heard, but we are speaking of hell.'

The librarian licked at his sagging lips. 'Legend has it that there was a time when our world and the world below were one, and devils roamed the earth. Great Euz cast them out, and spoke the First Law – forbidding all to touch the Other Side, or to speak to devils, or to tamper with the gates between.'

'The First Law, eh?'

'His son Glustrod, hungry for power, ignored his father's warnings, and he sought out secrets, and summoned devils, and sent them against his enemies. It is said his folly led to the destruction of Aulcus and the fall of the Old Empire, and that when he destroyed himself, he left the gates ajar . . . but I am not the expert on all that.'

'Who is?'

The old man grimaced. 'There were books here. Very old. Beautiful books, from the time of the Master Maker. Books on the subject of the Other Side. The divide between. The gates and the locks. Books on the subject of the Tellers of Secrets, and of their summoning and sending. A load of invention if you ask me. Myth and fantasy.'

'There were books?'

'They have been missing from my shelves for some years now.'

'Missing? Where are they?'

The old man frowned. 'Strange, that you of all people should ask that—'

'Enough!' Gloкта turned as quickly as he could to look behind him. Silber, the University Administrator, stood at the foot of the steps, with a look of the strangest horror and surprise on his rigid face. *Quite as if he had seen a ghost. Or even a demon.* 'That will be quite enough, Superior! We thank you for your visit.'

'Enough?' Gloкта gave a frown of his own. 'His Eminence will not be—'

'I know what his Eminence will or will not be . . .' *An unpleasantly familiar voice.* Superior Goyle worked his way slowly down the steps. He strolled around Silber, across the shadowy floor between the shelves. 'And I say enough. We most heartily thank you for your visit.' He leaned forwards, eyes popping furiously from his head. 'Make it your last!'

There had been some startling changes in the dining hall since Glokta went downstairs. The evening had grown dark outside the dirty windows, the candles had been lit in their tarnished sconces. *And, of course, there is the matter of two dozen widely assorted Practicals of the Inquisition.*

Two narrow-eyed natives of Suljuk sat staring at Glokta over their masks, as like as if they had been twins, their black boots up on the ancient dining table, four curved swords lying sheathed on the wood before them. Three dark-skinned men stood near one dark window, heads shaved, each with an axe at his belt and a shield on his back. A great tall Practical loomed up by the fireplace, long and thin as a birch tree with blond hair hanging over his masked face. Beside was a short one, almost dwarfish, his belt bristling with knives.

Glokta recognised the huge Northman called the Stone-Splitter from his previous visit to the University. *But it looks as if he has been attempting to split stones with his face since we last met, and with great persistence.* His cheeks were uneven, his brows were wonky, the bridge of his nose pointed sharply to the left. His ruin of a face was almost as disturbing as the enormous mallet he had clenched in his massive fists. But not quite.

So it went on, as strange and worrying a collection of murderers as could ever have been collected together in one place, and all heavily armed. *And it seems that Superior Goyle has restocked his freak show.* In the midst of them, and seeming quite at home, stood Practical Vitari, pointing this way and that, giving orders. *You would never have thought she was the mothering type, seeing her now, but I suppose we all have our hidden talents.*

Glokta threw his right arm up in the air. 'Who are we killing?'

All eyes turned towards him. Vitari stalked over, a frown across the freckled bridge of her nose. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

'I could ask you the same question.'

'If you know what's good for you, you'll ask no questions at all.'

Glokta leered his empty smile at her. 'If I knew what was good for me I'd never have lost my teeth, and questions are all I have left. What's in this old pile of dust that's of interest to you?'

'That's none of my business, and even less of yours. If you're looking for traitors, maybe you should look in your own house first, eh?'

'And what is that supposed to mean?'

Vitari leaned close to him and whispered through her mask. 'You saved my life, so let me return the favour. Get away from here. Get away, and keep away.'

Glokta shuffled down the passageway and up to his heavy door. *As far as Bayaz goes, we are no further on. Nothing that will bring a rare smile to the face of his Eminence. Summonings and sendings. Gods and devils. Always more questions.* He turned his key impatiently in the lock, desperate to sit down and take the weight from his trembling leg. *What was Goyle doing at the university? Goyle, and Vitari, and two dozen Practicals, all armed as if they were going to war?* He took a wincing step over the threshold. *There must be some—*

'Gah!' He felt his cane snatched away and he lurched sideways, clutching at the air. Something crunched into his face and filled his head with blinding pain. The next moment the floor thumped him in the back and drove his wind out in a long sigh. He blinked and slobbered, mouth salty with blood, the dark room swaying madly around him. *Oh dear, oh dear. A fist in the face, unless I am much mistaken. It never loses its impact.*

A hand grabbed the collar of his coat and dragged him up, the cloth cutting into his throat and making him squawk like a strangled chicken. Another had him by the belt and he was hauled bodily along, his knees and the toes of his boots scraping limp over the boards. He struggled weakly on a reflex, but only managed to send a stab of pain through his own back.

The bathroom door cracked against his head and banged open on the wall, he was dragged powerless across the darkened room towards the bath, still full of dirty water from that morning. 'Wait!' he croaked as he was wrestled over the edge. 'Who are—blurghhhh!'

The cold water closed around his head, the bubbles rushed around his face. He was held there, struggling, eyes bulging open with shock and panic, until it seemed his lungs would burst. Then he was yanked up by the hair, water pouring from his face and splattering into the bath. *A simple technique, but undeniably effective. I am greatly discomfited.* He took in a gasping breath. 'What do you—blarghhh!'

Back into the darkness, such air as he had managed to drag in gurgling out into the dirty water. *But whoever it is let me breathe. I am not being murdered. I am being softened up. Softened up for questions. I would laugh at the irony . . . were there any breath . . . left in my body . . .* He shoved at the bath and thrashed at the water. His legs kicked pointlessly, but the hand on the back of his neck was made of steel. His stomach clenched and his ribs heaved, desperate to drag in air. *Do not breathe . . . do not breathe . . . do not breathe!* He was just sucking in a great lungful of dirty water as he was snatched up from the bath and flung onto the boards, coughing, gasping, vomiting all at once.

'You are Glokta?' A woman's voice, short and hard, with a rough Kantic accent.

She squatted down in front of him, balanced on the balls of her feet, her wrists resting on her knees, her long brown hands hanging limp. She wore a man's shirt, loose around her scrawny shoulders, wet sleeves rolled up around her bony wrists. Her black hair was hacked off short and stuck from her head in greasy clumps. She had a thin, pale scar down her hard face, a scowl on her thin lips, but it was her eyes that were most off-putting, gleaming yellow in the half light from the corridor. *Small wonder that Severard was reluctant to follow her. I should have listened to him.*

'You are Glokta?'

There was no point denying it. He wiped the bitter drool from his chin with a shaking hand. 'I am Glokta.'

'Why are you watching me?'

He pushed himself painfully up to sitting. 'What makes you think I will have anything to say to—'

Her fist struck him on the point of his chin and snapped his head back, tore

a gasp out of him. His jaws banged together and one tooth punched a hole in the bottom of his tongue. He sagged back against the wall, the dark room lurching, his eyes filling up with tears. When things came back into focus she was staring at him, yellow eyes narrowed. 'I will keep hitting you until you give me answers, or you die.'

'My thanks.'

'Thanks?'

'I think you might have loosened my neck up just a fraction.' Gloкта smiled, showing her his few bloody teeth. 'For two years I was a captive of the Gurkish. Two years in the darkness of the Emperor's prisons. Two years of cutting, and chiselling, and burning. Do you think the thought of a slap or two scares me?' He chuckled bloody laughter in her face. 'It hurts more when I piss! Do you think I'm scared to die?' He grimaced at the stabbing through his spine as he leaned towards her. 'Every morning . . . that I wake up alive . . . is a disappointment! If you want answers you'll have to give me answers. Like for like.'

She stared at him for a long moment, not blinking. 'You were a prisoner of the Gurkish?'

Gloкта swept a hand over his twisted body. 'They gave me all this.'

'Huh. We have both lost something to the Gurkish, then.' She slid down onto crossed legs. 'Questions. Like for like. But if you try to lie to me—'

'Questions, then. I would be failing in my duties as a host if I did not allow you to go first.'

She did not smile. *But then she does not seem the joking type.* 'Why are you watching me?'

I could lie, but for what? I might as well die telling the truth. 'I am watching Bayaz. The two of you seem friendly, and Bayaz is hard to watch these days. So I am watching you.'

She scowled. 'He is no friend of mine. He promised me vengeance, that is all. He has yet to deliver.'

'Life is full of disappointments.'

'Life is made of disappointments. Ask your question, cripple.'

Once she has her answers, will it be bath-time again, and this time my last? Her flat yellow eyes gave nothing away. Empty, like the eyes of an animal. *But what are my choices?* He licked the blood from his lips, and leaned back against the wall. *I might as well die a little wiser.* 'What is the Seed?'

Her frown deepened by the smallest fraction. 'Bayaz said it is a weapon. A weapon of very great power. Great enough to turn Shaffa to dust. He thought it was hidden, at the edge of the World, but he was wrong. He was not happy to be wrong.' She frowned at him for a silent moment. 'Why are you watching Bayaz?'

'Because he stole the crown and put it on a spineless worm.'

She snorted. 'There at least we can agree.'

'There are those in my government who worry about the direction in which he might take us. Who worry profoundly.' Gloкта licked at one bloody tooth. 'Where is he taking us?'

'He tells me nothing. I do not trust him, and he does not trust me.'

'There too we can agree.'

‘He planned to use the Seed as a weapon. He did not find it, so he must find other weapons. My guess is he is taking you to war. A war against Khalul, and his Eaters.’

Glokta felt a flurry of twitches run up the side of his face and set his eyelid fluttering. *Damn treacherous jelly!* Her head jerked to the side. ‘You know of them?’

‘A passing acquaintance.’ *Well, where’s the harm?* ‘I caught one, in Dagoska. I asked it questions.’

‘What did it tell you?’

‘It talked of righteousness and justice.’ *Two things that I have never seen.* ‘It talked of war and sacrifice.’ *Two things that I have seen too much of.* ‘It said that your friend Bayaz killed his own master.’ The woman did not move so much as an eyelash. ‘It said that its father, the Prophet Khalul, still seeks vengeance.’

‘Vengeance,’ she hissed, her hands bunching into fists. ‘I will show them vengeance!’

‘What did they do to you?’

‘They killed my people.’ She uncrossed her legs. ‘They made me a slave.’ She rose smoothly to her feet, looming over him. ‘They stole my life from me.’

Glokta felt the corner of his mouth twitch up. ‘One more thing we have in common.’ *And I sense my borrowed time is up.*

She reached down and grabbed two fistfuls of his wet coat. She dragged him from the floor with fearsome strength, his back sliding up the wall. Body found floating in the bath . . . ? He felt his nostrils opening wide, the air hissing fast in his bloody nose, his heart thumping in anticipation. *No doubt my ruined body will struggle, as best it can. An irresistible reaction to the lack of air. The unconquerable instinct to breathe. No doubt I will thrash and wriggle, just as Tulkis, the Gurmish ambassador, thrashed and wriggled when they hanged him, and dragged his guts out for nothing.*

He did his twisted best to stay up under his own power, to stand as close to straight as he could manage. *After all, I was a proud man once, even if that is all far behind me. Hardly the end that Colonel Glokta would have hoped for. Drowned in the bath by a woman in a dirty shirt. Will they find me slumped over the rim, my arse in the air? But what does it matter? It is not how you die, but how you lived, that counts.*

She let go of his coat, flattened the front with a slap of her hand. *And what has my life been, these past years? What do I have that I might truly miss? Stairs? Soup? Pain? Lying in the darkness with the memories of the things I have done digging at me? Waking in the morning to the stink of my own shit? Will I miss tea with Ardee West? A little perhaps. But will I miss tea with the Arch Lector? It almost makes you wonder why I didn’t do it myself, years ago.* He stared into his killer’s eyes, as hard and bright as yellow glass, and he smiled. A smile of the purest relief. ‘I am ready.’

‘For what?’ She pressed something into his limp hand. The handle of his cane. ‘If you have more business with Bayaz, leave me out of it. I will not be so gentle next time.’ She backed slowly towards the doorway, a bright rectangle against the shadowy wall. She turned, and the sound of her boots receded down the corridor. Aside from the soft tip-tap of water dripping from his wet coat, all fell silent.

And so, it seems, I survive. Again. Glokta raised his eyebrows. Perhaps the trick is not wanting to.

The Fourth Day

He was an ugly bastard, this Easterner. A huge big one, dressed all in stinking, half-tanned furs and a bit of rusted chain-mail, more ornament than protection. Greasy black hair, bound up here and there with rough-forged silver rings, dripped with the thin rain. He had a great scar down one cheek and another across his forehead, and the countless nicks and pittings of lesser wounds and boils as a lad, nose flattened and bent sideways like a dented spoon. His eyes were screwed up tight with effort, his yellow teeth were bared, the front two missing, his grey tongue pressed into the gap. A face that had seen war all its days. A face that had lived by sword, and axe, and spear, and counted every day alive a bonus.

For Logen, it was almost like looking in a mirror.

They held each other as tight as a pair of bad lovers, blind to everything around them. They lumbered back and forward, lurching like feuding drunkards. They plucked and tugged, bit and gouged, gripped and tore, strained in frozen fury, blasting sour breath in each other's faces. An ugly, and a wearying, and a fatal dance, and all the while the rain came down.

Logen took a painful dig in the gut and had to twist and wriggle to smother a second. He gave a half-hearted head-butt and did nothing more than scuff Ugly's face with his forehead. He nearly got tripped, stumbled, felt the Easterner shift his weight, trying to find a set to throw him. Logen managed to dig him in the fruits with his thigh before he could do it, enough to make his arms go weak for a moment, enough so he could slide his hand up onto Ugly's neck.

Logen forced that hand up, inch by painful inch, his stretched-out forefinger creeping over the Easterner's pitted face while he peered down at it, cross-eyed, trying to tip his head out of the way. His hand gripped painful tight round Logen's wrist, trying to haul it back, but Logen had his shoulder dipped, his weight set right. The finger edged past his grimacing mouth, over his top lip, into Ugly's bent nose, and Logen felt his broken nail digging at the flesh inside. He crooked his finger, and bared his teeth, and twisted it about as best he could.

The Easterner hissed and thrashed around, but he was hooked. He'd no choice but to grab at Logen's wrist with his other hand and try to drag that tearing finger out of his face. But that left Logen one hand free.

He snatched a knife out and grunted as he stabbed, his arm jerking in and out. Quick punches, but with steel on the end of them. The blade squelched in the Easterner's gut, and his thigh, and his arm, and his chest, blood coming out in long streaks, splattering them both and trickling into the puddles under their boots. Once he was stabbed enough Logen caught him by his coat, hauled him into the air with a jaw-clenched effort, and roared as he flung him over the battlements. He plummeted away, limp as a carcass and soon to be

one, crashed to the ground in among his fellows.

Logen bent over the parapet, gasping at the wet air, the rain drops flitting down away from him. There were hundreds of them, it seemed like, milling around in the sea of mud at the base of the wall. Wild men, from out past the Crinna, where they hardly spoke right and cared nothing for the dead. They all were rain-soaked and filth-spattered, hiding under rough-made shields and waving rough-forged weapons, barbed and brutal. Their standards stood flapping in the rain behind them, bones and ragged hides, ghostly shadows in the downpour.

Some were carrying rickety ladders forwards, or lifting those that had been thrown down, trying to foot them near the wall and haul them up while rocks and spears and sodden arrows flapped and splattered into the mud. Others were climbing, shields held over their heads, two ladders up at Dow's side, one on Red Hat's side, one just to Logen's left. A pair of big savages were swinging great axes against the scarred gates, chopping wet splinters out with every blow. Logen pointed at them, screamed uselessly into the wet. No one heard him, or could have over the great noise of drumming rain, of crashing, thudding, scraping, blades on shields, shafts in flesh, battle cries and shrieks of pain.

He fumbled his sword up from the puddles on the walkway, dull metal glistening with beads of water. Just near him one of Shivers' Carls was facing off against an Easterner who'd scrambled from the top of a ladder. They traded a couple of blows, axe against shield then sword swishing at the empty air. The Easterner's axe-arm went up again and Logen hacked it off at the elbow, stumbled into his back and knocked him screaming on his face. The Carl finished him with a chop to the back of the skull, pointed his bloody sword over Logen's shoulder.

'There!'

Another Easterner with a big hook nose just getting to the top of the ladder, leaning forward over the battlements, right arm going back with a spear ready. Logen bellowed as he came for him.

His eyes went wide and the spear wobbled, too late to throw. He tried to swing out of the way, clinging to the wet wood with his free hand, but only managed to drag the ladder grating across the battlements. Logen's sword stabbed him under the arm and he flailed back with a grunt, dropping his spear behind him. Logen stabbed at him again, slipped and lunged too far, near falling into his arms. Big-Nose clawed at him, trying to bundle him over the parapet. Logen smashed him in the face with the pommel of his sword and knocked his head back, took some teeth out with a second blow. The third one knocked him senseless and he fell back off the ladder, plummeting down and taking one of his friends into the mud with him.

'Bring that pole!' Logen roared at the Carl with the sword.

'What?'

'Pole, you fucker!'

The Carl snatched the wet length of wood up and threw it through the rain. Logen dropped his sword and wedged the branched end against one upright of the ladder, started pushing for all he was worth. The Carl came and added his weight to it, and the ladder creaked, wobbled, and started tipping back. An

Easterner's face came up over the battlements, surprised-looking. He saw the pole. He saw Logen and the Carl growling at it. He tumbled off as the ladder dropped away, down on the heads of the bastards below.

Further along the wall another ladder had just been pushed back up and the Easterners were starting to climb it, shields up over their heads while Red Hat and his boys chucked rocks at them. Some had got to the top over on Dow's bit of the wall, and he could hear the shouting from there, the sounds of murder. Logen gnawed at his bloody lip, wondering whether to push on down there and give them some help, but he decided against. He'd be needed here before long.

So he took up the Maker's sword, and he nodded to the Carl who'd helped him, and he stood and caught his breath. He waited for the Easterners to come again, and all around him men fought, and killed, and died.

Devils, in a cold, wet, bloody hell. Four days of it, now, and it felt as if he'd been there forever. As if he'd never left. Perhaps he never had.

Like the Dogman's life weren't difficult enough already, there had to be rain.

Wet was an archer's worst fear, alright. Apart from being ridden down by horsemen, maybe, but that weren't so likely up a tower. The bows were slippery, the strings were stretchy, the feathers were sodden, which all made for some ineffective shooting. Rain was costing them their advantage, and that was a worry, but it could cost them more than that before the day was out. There were three big wild bastards working at the gates, two swinging heavy axes at the softened wood, the third trying to get a pry-bar in the gaps they'd made and tear the timbers apart.

'If we don't deal with them, they'll have those gates in!' Dogman shouted hoarse into the wet air.

'Uh,' said Grim, nodding his head, water flicking off his shaggy thatch of hair.

Took a good bit of bellowing and pointing from him and Tul, but Dogman got a crowd of his lads lined up by the slick parapet. Three score wet bows, all lowered at once, all drawn back creaking, all pointing down towards that gate. Three score men, frowning and taking aim, all dripping with water and getting wetter every minute.

'Alright then, loose!'

The bows went more or less together, the sounds muffled. The shafts spun down, bouncing off the wet wall, sticking in the rough wood of the gate, prickling the ground all round where the ditch used to be, before it became just another load of mud. Not what you'd call accurate, but there were a lot of shafts, and if you can't get quality, then numbers will have to do the job for you. The Easterner on the right dropped his axe, three arrows sticking out his chest, one through his leg. The one on the left slipped and fell on his side, went floundering for cover, an arrow in his shoulder. The one with the bar went down on his knees, thrashing around and grabbing behind him, trying to get at a shaft in the small of his back.

'Alright! Good!' the Dogman shouted. None of the rest of 'em seemed keen

to try the gate for the moment, which was something to be grateful for. There were still plenty trying the ladders, but that was a harder task to deal with from up here. They might just as easily shoot their own boys on the walls as the enemy in this weather. Dogman gritted his teeth, and loosed a harmless, looping wet arrow down into the milling crowd. Nothing they could do. The walls was Shivers job, and Dow's, and Red Hat's. The walls was Logen's job.

There was a crack, loud as the sky falling. The world went reeling bright, and soupy slow, sounds all echoing. Logen stumbled through this dream-place, the sword clattering out of his stupid fingers, lurched against the wall and grappled with it as it swayed around, trying to understand what had happened and not getting there.

Two men were struggling with each other over a spear, wrestling and jerking round and round, and Logen couldn't remember why. A man with long hair took a great slow blow with a club on his shield, a couple of splinters spinning, then he swept an axe round, teeth bared and shining, caught a wild-looking man in the legs and tore him off his feet. There were men everywhere, wet and furious, dirt and blood stained. A battle, maybe? Which side was he on?

Logen felt something warm tickling his eye, and he touched his hand to it. Frowned down at his red finger tips, turning pink as the rain pattered on them. Blood. Had someone hit him on the head, then? Or was he dreaming it? A memory, from long ago.

He spun round just before the club came down and crushed his skull like an egg, caught some hairy bastard's wrists with both hands. The world was suddenly fast, noisy, pain pulsing in his head. He lurched against the parapet, staring into a dirty, bearded, angry face, pressed up tight against his.

Logen let go the club with one hand, started snatching at his belt for a knife. He couldn't feel one. All that time spent sharpening all those blades, and now he needed one there was nothing to hand. Then he realised. The blade he was looking for was stuck in that ugly bastard, down in the mud somewhere at the base of the wall. He scrabbled round the other side of his belt, still wrestling at the club, but losing that battle now, given that he only had the one hand to work with. Logen got bent back, slowly, over the battlements. His fingers found the grip of a knife. The hairy Easterner tore his club free and lifted it up, opening his mouth wide and giving a stinking yell.

Logen stabbed him right through the face, and the blade went through one cheek and out the other and took a couple of teeth with it. Hairy's bellow turned to a high-pitched howl and he dropped his club and stumbled away, eyes bulging. Logen slid down and snatched his sword from under the trampling feet of the two fighting over the spear, waited a moment for the Easterner to come round close to him, then chopped through the back of one thigh and brought him down with a scream where the Carl could see to him.

Hairy was still drooling blood, one hand on the grip of the knife through his face, trying to work it free. Logen's sword made a red gash through the wet furs on his side, brought him to his knees. The next swing split his head in

half.

Not ten strides away Shivers was in bad trouble, backed up with three Easterners at him, another just getting to the top of a ladder, and all his boys kept busy behind. He winced as he took a hard blow from a hammer across his shield, stumbled back, his axe dropping from his hand and clattering on the stone. The thought did pass through Logen's mind that he'd be a deal better off if Shivers got his head flattened. But the odds were good that he'd be next.

So he took a great breath, and bellowed as he charged.

The first one turned just in time to get his face hacked open rather than the back of his skull. The second got his shield up, but Logen went low and chopped clean through his shin instead, sent him shrieking down on to his back, blood pumping out into the pools of water across the walkway. The third one was a big bastard, wild red hair sticking all ways off his head. He had Shivers stunned and on his knees by the parapet, his shield hanging down, blood running from a cut on his forehead. Red Hair raised a big hammer up to finish the job. Logen stabbed him through the back before he got the chance, the long blade sliding through him right to the hilt. Never take a man face to face if you can kill him from behind, Logen's father used to say, and that was one good piece of advice he'd always tried to follow. Red Hair thrashed and squealed, twisting madly with his last breaths, dragging Logen around after him by the hilt of his sword, but it wasn't long before he dropped.

Logen grabbed Shivers under the arm and hauled him up. He frowned hard as his eyes came back into focus, saw who was helping him. He leaned down and snatched his fallen axe up from the stones. Logen wondered for a moment if he was about to get it buried in his skull, but Shivers only stood there, blood running down his wet face from the cut across his head.

'Behind you,' said Logen, nodding past his shoulder. Shivers turned, Logen did the same, and they stood with their backs to each other. There were three or four ladders up now, around the gate, and the battle on the walls had broken up into a few separate, bloody little fights. There were Easterners clambering over the parapet, screaming their meaningless jabber, hard faces and hard weapons glistening wet, coming at Logen along the wall while more dragged themselves up. Behind him he heard the clash and grunt of Shivers fighting, but he paid it no mind. He could only deal with what was in front of him. You have to be realistic about these things.

He shuffled back, showing weariness that was only half-feigned, then as the first of them came on he gritted his teeth and leaped forward, cut him across the face and sent him screaming, hand clasped to his eyes. Logen stumbled into another and got barged in the chest with a shield, its rim catching him under the chin and making him bite his tongue.

Logen nearly tripped over the sprawled-out corpse of a dead Carl, righted himself just in time, flailed with his sword and hit nothing, reeled after it and felt something cut into his leg as he went. He gasped, and hopped, waving the sword around, all off-balance. He lunged at some moving fur, his leg gave under him and he piled into someone. They fell together and Logen's head cracked against the stone. They rolled and Logen struggled up on top, shouting and drooling, tangled his fingers in an Easterner's greasy hair and smashed his face into the stone, again and again until his skull went soft. He

dragged himself away, heard a blade clang against the walkway where he'd been, hauled himself up to his knees, sword loose in one sticky hand.

He knelt there, water running down his face, dragging in air. More of them coming at him, and nowhere to go. His leg was hurting, no strength in his arms. His head felt light, like it might float away. No strength left to fight with, hardly. More of them coming at him, one at the front with thick leather gloves, a big maul in his hands, its heavy spiked head red with blood. Looked like he'd already broken one skull with it, and Logen's would be next. Then Bethod would've won, at last.

Logen felt a cold feeling stab at his gut. A hard, empty feeling. His knuckles clicked as the muscles in his hand went rigid, gripping the sword painful tight. 'No!' he hissed. 'No, no, no.' But he might as well have said no to the rain. That cold feeling spread out, up through Logen's face, tugging his mouth into a bloody smile. Gloves came closer, his maul scraping against the wet stone. He glanced over his shoulder.

His head came apart, spraying out blood. Crummock-i-Phail roared like an angry bear, fingerbones flying round his neck, his great hammer whirling round and round his head in huge circles. The next Easterner tried to back away, holding up his shield. Crummock's hammer swung two-handed, ripped his legs out from under him, sent him tumbling over and over and onto his face on the stone. The big hillman sprang up onto the walkway, nimble as a dancer for all his great bulk, caught the next man a blow in the stomach that hurled him through the air and left him crumpled against the battlements.

Logen watched one set of savages murdering another, breathing hard as Crummock's boys whooped and screamed, paint on their faces smeared in the rain. They flooded up onto the wall, hacking at the Easterners with their rough swords and their bright axes, driving them back and shoving their ladders away, flinging their bodies over the parapet and into the mud below.

He knelt there, in a puddle, leaning on the cold grip of Kanedias' sword, its point dug into the stone walkway. He bent over and breathed hard, his cold gut sucking in and out, his raw mouth salty, his nose full of the stink of blood. He hardly dared to look up. He clenched his teeth, and closed his eyes, and hawked sour spit up onto the stones. He forced that cold feeling in his stomach down and it slunk away, for now, at least, and left him with only pain and weariness to worry about.

'Looks like those bastards had enough,' came Crummock's laughing voice from out of the drizzle. The hillman tipped his head back, mouth open, stuck his tongue out into the rain, then licked his lips. 'That was some good work you put in today, Bloody-Nine. Not that it ain't my special pleasure to watch you at it, but I'm glad to get my share.' He hefted his great long hammer up in one hand and spun it round as if it was a willow switch, peering at a great bloody stain on the head with a clump of hair stuck to it, then grinning wide.

Logen looked up at him, hardly enough strength left to lift his head. 'Oh aye. Good work. We'll go at the back tomorrow though, eh, since you're that keen? You can take the fucking wall.'

The rain was slacking, down to a thin spit and drizzle. A glimmer of fading sunlight broke through the sagging clouds, bringing Bethod's camp back into view, his muddy ditch and his standards, tents scattered across the valley. Dogman squinted, thought he could see a few men stood around the front watching the Easterners run back, a glint of sunlight on something. An eye-glass maybe, like the Union used, usually to look the wrong way. Dogman wondered if it was Bethod down there, watching it all happen. It would be just like Bethod to have got himself an eye-glass.

He felt a big hand clap him on the shoulder. 'We gave 'em a slap, chief,' rumbled Tul, 'and a good 'un!'

There was small doubt o' that. There were a lot of dead Easterners scattered in the mud round the base of that wall, a lot of wounded carried by their mates, or dragging themselves slow and painful back towards their lines. But there were a fair few killed on their side of the wall as well. Dogman could see a stack of muddy corpses over near the back of the fortress where they were doing the burying. He could hear someone screaming. Hard and nasty screams, the kind a man makes when he needs a limb taken off, or he's had one off already.

'We gave 'em a slap, aye,' Dogman muttered, 'but they gave us one as well. I'm not sure how many slaps we'll stand.' The barrels that carried their arrows were no more'n half full now, the rocks close to run out. 'Best send some boys to pick over the dead!' he shouted to the men over his shoulder. 'Get what we can while we can!'

'Can't have too many arrows at a time like this,' said Tul. 'Number o' those Crinna bastards we killed today, I reckon we'll have more spears tonight than we had this morning.'

Dogman managed to put a grin on his face. 'Nice of 'em to bring us something to fight with.'

'Aye. Reckon they'd get bored right quick if we ran out of arrows.' Tul laughed, and he clapped the Dogman on the back harder than ever, hard enough to make his teeth rattle. 'We did well! You did well! We're still alive, ain't we?'

'Some of us are.' Dogman looked down at the corpse of the one man who'd died up on the tower. An old boy, hair mostly grey, a rough-made arrow in his neck. Bad luck, that had been, to catch a shaft on a day as wet as today, but you're sure to get a measure of luck in a fight, both good and bad. He frowned down into the darkening valley. 'Where the hell are the Union at?'



At least the rain had stopped. You have to be grateful for the small things in life, like some smoky kind of a fire after the wet. You have to be grateful for the small things, when any minute might be your last.

Logen sat alone beside his scrub of a flame, and rubbed gently at his right palm. It was sore, pink, stiff from gripping the rough hilt of the Maker's sword all the long day, blistered round the joints of his fingers. His head was bruised

all over. The cut on his leg was burning some, but he could still walk well enough. He could've ended up a lot worse. There were more than three score buried now, and they were putting them in pits for a dozen each, just as Crummock had said they would. Three score and more gone back to the mud, and twice that many hurt, a lot of them bad.

Over by the big fire, he could hear Dow growling about how he'd stabbed some Easterner in the fruits. He could hear Tul's rumbling laughter. Logen hardly felt like a part of it, any more. Maybe he never had been. A set of men he'd fought and beaten. Lives he'd spared, for no reason that made sense. Men who'd hated him worse than death, but been bound to follow. Hardly more his friends than Shivers was. Perhaps the Dogman was his only true friend in all the wide Circle of the World, and even in his eyes, from time to time, Logen thought he could see that old trace of doubt, that old trace of fear. He wondered if he could see it now, as the Dogman came up out of the darkness.

'You think they'll come tonight?' he asked.

'He'll give it a go in the dark sooner or later,' said Logen, 'but my guess is he'll leave it 'til we're a bit more worn down.'

'You get more worn down than this?'

'I guess we'll find out.' Logen grimaced as he stretched out his aching legs. 'It really seems like this shit used to be easier.'

Dogman gave a snort. Not a laugh, really. More just letting Logen know he'd heard. 'Memory can work some magic. You remember Carleon?'

'Course I do.' Logen looked down at his missing finger, and he bunched his fist, so it looked the same as it always had. 'Strange, how it all seemed so simple back in them days. Who you fought for, and why. Can't say it ever bothered me.'

'It bothered me,' said Dogman.

'It did? You should've said something.'

'Would you have listened?'

'No. I guess not.'

They sat there for a minute, in silence.

'You reckon we'll live through this?' asked the Dogman.

'Maybe. If the Union turns up tomorrow, or the day after.'

'You think they will?'

'Maybe. We can hope.'

'Hoping for a thing don't make it happen.'

'The opposite, usually. But every day we're still alive is a chance. Maybe this time it'll work.'

Dogman frowned at the shifting flames. 'That's a lot of maybes.'

'That's war.'

'Who'd have thought we'd be relying on a bunch of Southerners to solve our problems for us, eh?'

'I reckon you solve 'em any way you can. You have to be realistic.'

'Being realistic, then. You reckon we'll live through this?'

Logen thought about it for a while. 'Maybe.'

Boots squelched in the soft earth, and Shivers walked up quiet towards the fire. There was a grey bandage wrapped round his head, where he'd taken that cut, and his hair hung down damp and greasy from under it.

‘Chief,’ he said.

Dogman smiled as he got up, and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Alright, Shivers. That was good work, today. I’m glad you came over, lad. We all are.’ He gave Logen a long look. ‘All of us. Think I might try and get a rest for a minute. I’ll see you boys when they come again. Most likely it’ll be soon enough.’ He walked off into the night, and left Shivers and Logen staring one at the other.

Probably Logen should have got his hand near to a knife, watched for sudden moves and all the rest. But he was too tired and too sore for it. So he just sat there, and watched. Shivers pressed his lips together, squatting down beside the fire opposite, slow and reluctant, as if he was about to eat something he knew was rotten, but had no choice.

‘If I’d have been in your place,’ he said, after a while, ‘I would’ve let those bastards kill me today.’

‘Few years ago I’m sure I would’ve.’

‘What changed?’

Logen frowned as he thought about it. Then he shrugged his aching shoulders. ‘I’m trying to be better than I was.’

‘You think that’s enough?’

‘What else can I do?’

Shivers frowned at the fire. ‘I wanted to say . . .’ He worked the words around in his mouth and spat them out. ‘That I’m grateful, I guess. You saved my life today. I know it.’ He wasn’t happy about saying it, and Logen knew why. It’s hard to be done a favour by a man you hate. It’s hard to hate him so much afterwards. Losing an enemy can be worse than losing a friend, if you’ve had him for long enough.

So Logen shrugged again. ‘It’s nothing. What a man should do for his crew, that’s all. I owe you a lot more. I know that. I can never pay what I owe you.’

‘No. But it’s some kind o’ start at it, far as I’m concerned.’ Shivers got up and took a step away. Then he stopped, and turned back, firelight shifting over one side of his hard, angry face. ‘It ain’t ever as simple, is it, as a man is just good or bad? Not even you. Not even Bethod. Not anybody.’

‘No.’ Logen sat and watched the flames moving. ‘No, it ain’t ever that simple. We all got our reasons. Good men and bad men. It’s all a matter of where you stand.’

The Perfect Couple

One of Jezal's countless footmen perched on the stepladder, and lowered the crown with frowning precision onto his head, its single enormous diamond flashing pricelessly bright. He gave it the very slightest twist back and forth, the fur-trimmed rim gripping Jezal's skull. He climbed back down, whisked the stepladder away, and surveyed the result. So did half a dozen of his fellows. One of them stepped forward to tweak the precise positioning of Jezal's gold-embroidered sleeve. Another grimaced as he flicked an infinitesimal speck of dust from his pure white collar.

'Very good,' said Bayaz, nodding thoughtfully to himself. 'I believe that you are ready for your wedding.'

The peculiar thing, now that Jezal had a rare moment to think about it, was that he had not, in any way of which he was aware, agreed to get married. He had neither proposed nor accepted a proposal. He had never actually said 'yes' to anything. And yet here he was, preparing to be joined in matrimony in a few short hours, and to a woman he scarcely knew at all. It had not escaped his notice that in order to have been managed so quickly the arrangements must have been well underway before Bayaz had even suggested the notion. Perhaps before Jezal had even been crowned . . . but he supposed it was not so very surprising. Since his enthronement he had drifted helplessly through one incomprehensible event after another, like a man shipwrecked and struggling to keep his head above water, out of sight of land, dragged who knew where by unseen, irresistible currents. But considerably better dressed.

He was gradually starting to realise that the more powerful a man became, the fewer choices he really had. Captain Jezal dan Luthar had been able to eat what he liked, to sleep when he liked, to see who he liked. His August Majesty King Jezal the First, on the other hand, was bound by invisible chains of tradition, expectation, and responsibility, that prescribed every aspect of his existence, however small.

Bayaz took a discerning step forward. 'Perhaps the top button undone here —'

Jezal jerked away with some annoyance. The attention of the Magus to every tiny detail of his life was becoming more than tiresome. It seemed that he could scarcely use the latrine without the old bastard poking through the results. 'I know how to button a coat!' he snapped. 'Should I expect to find you here tonight when I bring my new wife to our bed-chamber, ready to instruct me on how best to use my prick?'

The footmen coughed, and averted their eyes, and scraped away towards the corners of the room. Bayaz himself neither smiled nor frowned. 'I stand always ready to advise your Majesty, but I had hoped that might be one item of business you could manage alone.'

‘I hope you’re well prepared for our little outing. I’ve been getting ready all morn—’ Ardee froze when she looked up and saw Glokta’s face. ‘What happened to you?’

‘What, this?’ He waved his hand at the mottled mass of bruises. ‘A Kantic woman broke into my apartments in the night, punched me repeatedly and near drowned me in the bath.’ An experience I would not recommend.

Evidently she did not believe him. ‘What really happened?’

‘I fell down the stairs.’

‘Ah. Stairs. They can be brutal bastards when you’re not that firm on your feet.’ She stared at her half-full glass, her eyes slightly misty.

‘Are you drunk?’

‘It’s the afternoon, isn’t it? I try always to be drunk by now. Once you start a job you should give it your best. Or so my father liked to tell me.’

Glokta narrowed his eyes at her, and she stared back evenly over the rim of her glass. *No trembling lip, no tragic face, no streaks of bitter tears down the cheek.* She seemed no less happy than usual. *Or no more unhappy, perhaps. But Jezal dan Luthar’s wedding day can be no joyous occasion for her. No one appreciates being jilted, whatever the circumstances. No one enjoys being abandoned.*

‘We need not go, you know.’ Glokta winced as he tried unsuccessfully to stretch some movement into his wasted leg, and the wince itself caused a ripple of pain through his split lips and across his battered face. ‘I certainly won’t complain if I do not have to walk another step today. We can sit here, and talk of rubbish and politics.’

‘And miss the king’s marriage?’ gasped Ardee, one hand pressed to her chest in fake horror. ‘But I really must see what the Princess Terez is wearing! They say she is the most beautiful woman in the world, and even scum like me must have someone to look up to.’ She tipped back her head and swilled down the last of her wine. ‘Having fucked the groom is really no excuse for missing a wedding, you know.’



The flagship of Grand Duke Orso of Talins ploughed slowly, deliberately, majestically forwards, under no more than quarter sail, a host of seabirds flapping and calling in the rich blue sky above. It was by far the largest ship that Jezal, or anyone among the vast crowds that lined the quay and crammed the roofs and windows of the buildings along the waterfront, had ever laid eyes upon.

It was decked out in its finest: coloured bunting fluttered from the rigging and its three towering masts were hung with bright flags, the sable cross of Talins and the golden sun of the Union, side by side in honour of the happy occasion. But it looked no less menacing for that. It looked as Logen Ninefingers might have in a dandy’s jacket. Unmistakably still a man of war, and appearing more savage rather than less for the gaudy finery in which it

was plainly uncomfortable. As the means of bringing a single woman to Adua, and that woman Jezal's bride-to-be, this mighty vessel was anything but reassuring. It implied that Grand Duke Orso might be an intimidating presence as a father-in-law.

Jezal saw sailors now, crawling among the myriad ropes like ants through a bush, bringing the acres of sailcloth in with well-practised speed. They let the mighty ship plough forward under its own momentum, its vast shadow falling over the quay and plunging half the welcoming party into darkness. It slowed, the air full of the creaking of timbers and hawsers. It came to a deliberate stop, dwarfing the now tiny-seeming boats meekly tethered to either side as a tiger might dwarf kittens. The golden figurehead, a woman twice life-size thrusting a spear towards the heavens, glittered menacingly far over Jezal's head.

A huge wharf had been specially constructed in the middle of the quay where the draught was at its deepest. Down this gently sloping ramp the royal party of Talins descended into Adua, like visitors from a distant star where everyone was rich, beautiful, and obviously happy.

To either side marched a row of bearded guardsmen, all dressed in identical black uniforms, their helmets polished to a painful pitch of mirror brightness. Between them, in two rows of six, came a dozen ladies-in-waiting, each one arrayed in red, or blue, or vivid purple silks, each one as splendid as a queen herself.

But not one of the awestruck multitude on the waterfront could have been in any doubt who was the centre of attention. The Princess Terez glided along at the fore: tall, slender, impossibly regal, as graceful as a circus dancer and as stately as an Empress of legend. Her pure white gown was stitched with glittering gold, her shimmering hair was the colour of polished bronze, a chain of daunting diamonds flashed and sparkled on her pale chest in the bright sunlight. The Jewel of Talins seemed at that moment an apt name indeed. Terez looked as pure and dazzling, as proud and brilliant, as hard and beautiful as a flawless gemstone.

As her feet touched the stones the crowds burst out into a tumultuous cheer, and flower petals began to fall in well-orchestrated cascades from the windows of the buildings high above. So it was that she advanced on Jezal with magnificent dignity, her head held imperiously high, her hands clasped proudly before her, over a soft carpet and through a sweet-smelling haze of fluttering pink and red.

To call it a breathtaking entrance would have been understatement of an epic order.

'Your August Majesty,' she murmured, somehow managing to make him feel like the humble one as she curtsied, and behind her the ladies followed suit, and the guardsmen bowed low, all with impeccable coordination. 'My father, the Grand Duke Orso of Talins, sends his profound apologies,' and she rose up perfectly erect again as though hoisted by invisible strings, 'but urgent business in Styria prevents him from attending our wedding.'

'You are all we need,' croaked Jezal, cursing silently a moment later as he realised he had completely ignored the proper form of address. It was somewhat difficult to think clearly, under the circumstances. Terez was even

more breathtaking now than when he had last seen her, a year or more ago, arguing savagely with Prince Ladisla at the feast held in his honour. The memory of her vicious shrieking did little to encourage him, but then Jezal would hardly have been delighted by the prospect of marrying Ladisla himself. After all, the man had been a complete ass. Jezal was an entirely different sort of person and could no doubt expect a different response. So he hoped.

‘Please, your Highness,’ and he held out his hand to her. She rested hers on it, seeming to weigh less than a feather.

‘Your Majesty does me too much honour.’

The hooves of the grey horses crackled on the paving, the carriage-wheels whirred smoothly. They set off up the Kingsway, a company of Knights of the Body riding in tight formation around them, arms and armour glinting, each stride of the great thoroughfare lined with appreciative commoners, each door and window filled with smiling subjects. All there to cheer for their new king, and for the woman soon to be their queen.

Jezal knew he must look an utter idiot next to her. A clumsy, low-born, ill-mannered oaf, who had not the slightest right to share her carriage, unless, perhaps, she was using him as a footrest. He had never in his life felt truly inferior before. He could scarcely believe that he was marrying this woman. Today. His hands were shaking. Positively shaking. Perhaps some heartfelt words might help them both relax.

‘Terez . . .’ She continued to wave imperiously to the crowds. ‘I realise . . . that we do not know each other in the least, but . . . I would like to know you.’ The slightest twitch of her mouth was the only sign that she had heard him. ‘I know that this must have come as a terrible shock to you, just as it has to me. I hope, if there is anything I can do . . . to make it easier, that—’

‘My father feels the interests of my country are best served by this marriage, and it is a daughter’s place to obey. Those of us born to high station are long prepared to make sacrifices.’

Her perfect head turned smoothly on her perfect neck, and she smiled. A smile slightly forced, perhaps, but no less radiant for that. It was hard to believe that a face so smooth and flawless could be made of meat, like everybody else’s. It seemed like porcelain, or polished stone. It was a constant, magical delight to see it move. He wondered if her lips were cool or warm. He would have liked very much to find out. She leaned close to him, and placed her hand gently on the back of his. Warm, undoubtedly warm, and soft, and very much made of flesh. ‘You really should wave,’ she murmured, her voice full of Styrian song.

‘Er, yes,’ he croaked, his mouth very dry, ‘yes, of course.’

Glokta stood, Ardee beside him, and frowned at the doors of the Lords’ Round. Beyond those towering gates, in the great circular hall, the ceremony was taking place. *Oh, joyous, joyous day!* High Justice Marovia’s wise exhortations would be echoing from the gilded dome, the happy couple would be speaking their solemn vows with light hearts. Only the lucky few had been allowed within to bear witness. *The rest of us must worship from afar.* And quite a crowd

had gathered to do just that. The wide Square of Marshals was choked with them. Glokta's ears were stuffed with their excited babbling. *A sycophantic throng, all eager for their divine Majesties to emerge.*

He rocked impatiently back and forth, from side to side, grimacing and hissing, trying to get the blood to flow in his aching legs, the cramps to be still. *But standing in one place for this length of time is, to put it simply, torture.*

'How long can a wedding take?'

Ardee raised one dark eyebrow. 'Perhaps they couldn't keep their hands off each other, and are busy consummating the marriage right there on the floor of the Lords' Round.'

'How bloody long can a consummation take?'

'Lean on me if you need to,' she said, holding out her elbow to him.

'The cripple using the drunk for support?' Glokta frowned. 'We make quite the couple.'

'Fall over if you prefer, and knock out the rest of your teeth. I'll lose no sleep over it.'

Perhaps I should take her up on the offer, if only for a moment. After all, where's the harm? But then the first shrill cheers began to float up, soon joined by more and more until a jubilant roar was making the air throb. The doors of the Lords' Round were finally being heaved open, and the High King and Queen of the Union emerged into the bright sunlight, hand in hand.

Even Glokta was forced to admit that they made a dazzling pair. Like monarchs of myth they stood arrayed in brilliant white, trimmed with twinkling embroidery, matching golden suns across the back of her long gown and his long coat, glittering as they turned to the crowds. Each tall, and slender, and graceful, each crowned with shining gold and a single flashing diamond. *Both so very young, and so very beautiful, and with all their happy, rich, and powerful lives ahead of them. Hurrah! Hurrah for them! My shrivelled turd of a heart bursts open with joy!*

Glokta rested his hand on Ardee's elbow, and he leaned towards her, and he smiled his most twisted, toothless, grotesque grin. 'Is it really true that our King is more handsome than I?'

'Offensive nonsense!' She thrust out her chest and tossed her head, giving Glokta a withering sneer down her nose. 'And I sparkle more brightly than the Jewel of Talins!'

'Oh, you do, my dear, you absolutely do. We make them look like beggars!'

'Like scum.'

'Like cripples.'

They chuckled together as the royal pair swept majestically across the square, accompanied by a score of watchful Knights of the Body. The Closed Council followed behind at a respectful distance, eleven stately old men with Bayaz among them in his arcane vestments, smiling almost as wide as the glorious couple themselves.

'I didn't even like him,' muttered Ardee under her breath, 'to begin with. Not really.' *That certainly makes two of us.*

'No need to weep. You're far too sharp to have been satisfied with a dullard like him.'

She breathed in sharply. 'I'm sure you're right. But I was so bored, and

lonely, and tired.' *And drunk, no doubt.* She shrugged her shoulders hopelessly. 'He made me feel like I was something more than a burden. He made me feel . . . wanted.'

And what makes you suppose that I want to know about it? 'Wanted, you say? How wonderful. And now?'

She looked miserably down at the ground, and Glokta felt just the smallest trace of guilt. *But guilt only really hurts when there's nothing else to worry about.*

'It was hardly as if it was true love.' He saw the thin sinews in her neck moving as she swallowed. 'But somehow I always thought it would be me making a fool of him.'

'Huh.' *How rarely any of us get what we expect.*

The royal party processed gradually out of view, the last splendid courtiers and shining bodyguards tramping after them, the sound of rapturous applause creeping off towards the palace. *Towards their glorious futures, and we guilty secrets are by no means invited.*

'Here we stand,' murmured Ardee. 'The off-cuts.'

'The wretched leavings.'

'The rotten stalks.'

'I wouldn't worry over much.' Glokta gave a sigh. 'You are still young, clever, and passably pretty.'

'Epic praise indeed.'

'You have all your teeth and both your legs. A marked advantage over some of us. I do not doubt that you will soon find some other high-born idiot to entrap, and no harm done.'

She turned away from him, and hunched her shoulders, and he guessed that she was biting her lip. He winced, and lifted his hand to lay it on her shoulder . . . *The same hand that cut Sepp dan Teufel's fingers into slices, that pinched the nipples from Inquisitor Harker's chest, that carved one Gurmish emissary into pieces and burned another, that sent innocent men to rot in Angland, and so on, and so on . . . He jerked it back, and let it fall. Better to cry all the tears in the world than be touched by that hand. Comfort comes from other sources, and flows to other destinations.* He frowned out across the square, and left Ardee to her misery.

The crowd cheered on.

It was a magnificent event, of course. No effort or expense had been spared. Jezal would not have been at all surprised if he had five hundred guests, and no more than a dozen of them known to himself in any significant degree. The Lords and Ladies of the Union. The great men of Closed and Open Councils. The richest and the most powerful, dressed in their best and on their best behaviour.

The Chamber of Mirrors was a fitting venue. The most spectacular room in the entire palace, as big as a battlefield and made to seem larger yet by the great mirrors which covered every wall, creating the disconcerting impression of dozens of other magnificent weddings, in dozens of other adjoining ballrooms. A multitude of candles flickered and waved on the tables, and in the sconces, and among the crystal chandeliers high above. Their soft light

shone on the silverware, glittered on the jewels of the guests, and was reflected back from the dark walls, gleaming into the far, dim distance: a million points of light, like the stars in a dark night sky. A dozen of the Union's finest musicians played subtle and entrancing music, and it mingled with the swell of satisfied chatter, the clink and rattle of old money and new cutlery.

It was a joyous celebration. The evening of a lifetime. For the guests.

For Jezal it was something else, and he was not sure what. He sat at a gilded table with his queen beside him, the two of them outnumbered ten to one by fawning servants, displayed to the full view of the whole assembly as though they were a pair of prize exhibits in a zoo. Jezal sat in a haze of awkwardness, in a dreamlike silence, startling from time to time like a sick rabbit as a powdered footman blindsided him with vegetables. Terez sat on his right, occasionally spearing the slightest morsel with a discerning fork, lifting it, chewing it, swallowing it with elegant precision. Jezal had never thought that it was possible to eat beautifully. He now realised his mistake.

He could scarcely remember the ringing words of the High Justice that had, he supposed, bound the two of them irrevocably together. Something about love and the security of the nation, he vaguely recalled. But he could see the ring that he had handed numbly to Terez in the Lords' Round, its enormous blood-red stone glittering on her long middle finger. He chewed at a slice of the finest meat, and it tasted like mud in his mouth. They were man and wife.

He saw now that Bayaz had been right, as always. The people longed for something effortlessly higher than themselves. They might not all have had the king they would have asked for, but no one could possibly deny that Terez was all a queen should be and more. The mere idea of Ardee West sitting in that gilded chair was absurd. And yet Jezal felt a pang of guilt when the idea occurred, closely followed by a greater one of sadness. It would have been a comfort to have someone to talk to, then. He gave a painful sigh. If he was to spend his life with this woman, they would have to speak. The sooner they began, he supposed, the better.

'I hear that Talins . . . is a most beautiful city.'

'Indeed,' she said with careful formality, 'but Adua has its sights also.' She paused, and looked down unhopelessly at her plate.

Jezal cleared his throat. 'This is somewhat . . . difficult to adjust to.' He ventured a fraction of a smile.

She blinked, and looked out at the room. 'It is.'

'Do you dance?'

She turned her head smoothly to look at him without the slightest apparent movement of her shoulders. 'A little.'

He pushed back his chair and stood up. 'Then shall we, your Majesty?'

'As you wish, your Majesty.'

As they made their way towards the middle of the wide floor, the chatter gradually diminished. The Chamber of Mirrors grew deathly quiet aside from the clicking of his polished boots, and her polished shoes, on the glistening stone. Jezal swallowed as they took their places, surrounded on three sides by the long tables, and the legions of magnificent guests, all watching. He had rather that same feeling of breathless anticipation, of fear and excitement, that

he had used to have when he stepped into the fencing circle against an unknown opponent, before the roaring crowd.

They stood still as statues, looking into each other's eyes. He held out his hand, palm up. She reached out, but instead of taking it she pressed the back of her hand firmly against the back of his and pushed it up so that their fingers were level. She lifted one eyebrow by the slightest margin. A silent challenge, that no one else in the hall could possibly have seen.

The first long drawn-out note sobbed from the strings and echoed around the chamber. They set off, circling each other with exaggerated slowness, the golden hem of Terez' dress swishing across the floor, her feet out of sight so that she appeared to glide rather than take steps, her chin held painfully high. They moved first one way and then the other, and in the mirrors around them a thousand other couples moved in time, stretching away into the shadowy distance, crowned and dressed in flawless white and gold.

As the second phrase began, and other instruments joined in, Jezal began to realise that he was utterly outclassed, worse than ever he had been by Bremer dan Gorst. Terez moved with such immaculate poise that he was sure she could have balanced a glass of wine on her head without spilling a drop. The music grew louder, faster, bolder, and Terez' movements came faster and bolder with it. It seemed as if she somehow controlled the musicians with her outstretched hands, the two were linked so perfectly. He tried to steer her and she stepped effortlessly around him. She feinted one way and whirled the other and Jezal almost went over on his arse. She dodged and spun with masterful disguise and left him lunging at nothing.

The music grew faster yet, the musicians sawed and plucked with furious concentration. Jezal made a vain attempt to catch her but Terez twisted away, dazzling him with a flurry of skirts that he could barely follow. She almost tripped him with a foot which was gone before he knew it, tossed her head and almost stabbed him in the eye with her crown. The great and good of the Union looked on in enchanted silence. Even Jezal found himself a dumbstruck spectator. It was the most he could do to remain in roughly the right positions to be made an utter fool of.

He was not sure whether he was relieved or disappointed when the music slowed again and she offered out her hand as though it were a rare treasure. He pressed the back of his against it and they circled each other, drawing closer and closer. As the last refrain wept from the instruments she pressed herself against him, her back to his chest. Slowly they turned, and slower still, his nose full of the smell of her hair. At the last long note she sank back and he lowered her gently, her neck stretching out, her head dropping, her delicate crown almost brushing the floor. And there was silence.

The room broke into rapturous applause, but Jezal hardly heard them. He was too busy staring at his wife. There was a faint colour to her cheek now, her lips slightly parted exposing flawless front teeth, and the lines of her jaw, and stretched-out neck, and slender collar-bones were etched with shadow and ringed with sparkling diamonds. Lower down her chest rose and fell imperiously in her bodice with her rapid breathing, the slightest, fascinating sheen of sweat nestling in her cleavage. Jezal would have very much liked to nestle there himself. He blinked, his own breath sharp in his throat.

‘If it please your Majesty,’ she murmured.

‘Eh? Oh . . . of course.’ He whisked her back to her feet as the applause continued. ‘You dance . . . magnificently.’

‘Your Majesty is too kind,’ she replied, with the barest fragment of a smile, but a smile nonetheless. He beamed gormlessly back at her. His fear and confusion had, in the space of a single dance, smoothly transformed into a most pleasurable excitement. He had been gifted a glimpse beneath the icy shell, and plainly his new Queen was a woman of rare and fiery passion. A hidden side to her that he was now greatly looking forward to investigating further. Looking forward so sharply, in fact, that he was forced to avert his eyes and stare off into the corner, frowning and trying desperately to think of other things, lest the tightness of his trousers caused him to embarrass himself in front of the assembled guests.

The sight of Bayaz grinning in the corner was for once just what he needed to see, the old man’s cold smile cooling his ardour as surely as a bucket of iced water.

Glokta had left Ardee in her over-furnished living room making every effort to get even more drunk, and ever since he had found himself in a black mood. *Even for me. There’s nothing like the company of someone even more wretched than yourself to make you feel better. Trouble is, take their misery away and your own presses in twice as cold and dreary behind it.*

He slurped another half mouthful of gritty soup from his spoon, grimaced as he forced the over-salty slop down his throat. *I wonder how wonderful a time King Jezal is enjoying now? Lauded and admired by all, gorging himself on the best food and the best company.* He dropped the spoon into the bowl, his left eye twitching, and winced at a ripple of pain through his back and down into his leg. *Eight years since the Gurkish released me, yet I am still their prisoner, and always will be. Trapped in a cell no bigger than my own crippled body.*

The door creaked open and Barnam shuffled in to collect the bowl. Glokta looked from the half-dead soup to the half-dead old man. The best food, and the best company. He would have laughed if his split lips had allowed it.

‘Finished, sir?’ asked the servant.

‘More than likely.’ *I have been unable to pull the means of destroying Bayaz out of my arse, and so, of course, his Eminence will not be pleased. How displeased can he get, do we suppose, before he loses patience entirely? But what can be done?*

Barnam carried the bowl from the room, pulled the door shut behind him, and left Glokta alone with his pain. *What is it that I did to deserve this? And what is it that Luthar did? Is he not just as I was? Arrogant, vain, and selfish as hell? Is he a better man? Then why has life punished me so harshly, and rewarded him so richly?*

But Glokta already knew the answer. *The same reason that innocent Sepp dan Teufel languishes in Angland with his fingers shortened. The same reason that loyal General Vissbruck died in Dagoska, while treacherous Magister Eider was let live. The same reason that Tulkis, the Gurkish Ambassador, was butchered in front of a howling crowd for a crime he did not commit.*

He pressed his sore tongue into one of his few remaining teeth. Life is not fair.

Jezal pranced down the hallway in a dream, but no longer the panicked nightmare of the morning. His head was spinning from praise, and applause, and approval. His body was glowing with dancing, and wine, and, increasingly, lust. With Terez beside him, for the first time in his brief reign, he truly felt like a king. Gems and metal, silk and embroidery, and pale, smooth skin all shone excitingly in the soft candlelight. The evening had turned out to be a delight, and the night promised only to be better yet. Terez might have seemed as hard as a jewel from a distance, but Jezal had held her in his arms, and he knew better.

The great panelled doors of the royal bedchamber were held open by a pair of cringing footmen, then shut silently as the King and Queen of the Union swept past. The mighty bed dominated the far side of the room, sprays of tall feathers at the corners of its canopy casting long shadows up onto the gilded ceiling. Its rich green curtains hung invitingly wide, the silken space beyond filled with soft and tantalising shadows.

Terez took a few slow steps into the chamber ahead of him, her head bowed, while Jezal turned the key in the lock with a long, smooth rattling of wards. His breath came fast as he stepped up behind his wife, lifted his hand and placed it gently on her bare shoulder. He felt the muscles stiffen under her smooth skin, smiled at her nervousness, matching his own so closely. He wondered if he should say something to try and calm her, but what would have been the purpose? They both knew what had to happen now, and Jezal for one was impatient to begin.

He came closer, slipping his free hand around her waist, feeling his palm hiss over rough silk. He brushed the nape of her neck with his lips, once, twice, three times. He nuzzled against her hair, dragging in her fragrance and breathing it out softly against the side of her face. He felt her tremble at his breath upon her skin, but that only encouraged him. He slid his fingers over her shoulder and across her chest, her diamonds trailing over the back of his hand as he slipped it down into her bodice. He moved up closer yet, pressing himself against her, making a satisfied growl in his throat, his prick nudging pleasantly into her backside through their clothes—

In a moment she had torn away from him with a gasp, spun around and slapped him across the face with a smack that set his head ringing. ‘You filthy bastard!’ she shrieked in his face, spit flying from her twisted mouth. ‘You son of a fucking whore! How dare you touch me? Ladisla was a cretin, but at least his blood was clean!’

Jezal gaped, one hand pressed against his burning face, his whole body rigid with shock. He reached out feebly with his other hand. ‘But I—oof!’

Her knee caught him between the legs with pitiless accuracy, driving the wind from his chest, making him teeter for a breathless moment, then bringing him down like a sledgehammer to a house of cards. As he slid groaning to the carpet in that special, shooting agony that only a blow to the

fruits can produce, it was little consolation that he had been right.

His Queen was quite evidently a woman of rare and fiery passion.

The tears flowing so liberally from his eyes were not just of pain, and awful surprise, and temporary disappointment, they were, increasingly, of deepening horror. It seemed that he had misjudged Terez' feelings most seriously. She had smiled for the crowds, but now, in private, she gave every indication of despising him and all he stood for. The fact that he had been born a bastard was hardly something he could ever change. For all he knew his wedding night was about to be spent on the royal floor. The queen had already hurried across the room, and the curtains of the bed were tightly drawn against him.

The Seventh Day

The Easterners had come again last night. Crept up by darkness, found a spot to climb in and killed a sentry. Then they'd set a ladder and a crowd of 'em had sneaked inside by the time they were found out. The cries had woken the Dogman, hardly sleeping anyway, and he'd scrambled awake in the black, all tangled with his blanket. Enemies inside the fortress, men running and shouting, shadows in the dark, everything reeking of panic and chaos. Men fighting by starlight, and by torchlight, and by no light at all, blades swung with hardly a notion of where they were headed, boots stumbling and kicking showers of bright sparks out of the guttering campfires.

They'd driven 'em back in the end. They'd herded them to the wall, and cut them down in numbers, and only three had lived to drop their weapons and give up. A bad mistake for them, as it turned out. There were a lot of men dead, these seven days. Every time the sun went down there were more graves. No one was in much of a merciful mood, providing they'd been suited that way in the first place, and not many had. So when they'd caught these three, Black Dow had trussed 'em up on the wall where Bethod and all the rest could see. Trussed 'em up in the hard blue dawn, first streaks of light just stabbing across the black sky, and he'd doused them all with oil and set a spark to them. One by one he'd done it. So the others could see what was coming and set to screaming before their turn.

Dogman didn't much take to seeing men on fire. He didn't like hearing their shrieks and their fat crackling. He didn't smile at a nose-full of the sick-sweet stink of their burning meat. But he didn't think of trying to stop it neither. There was a time for soft opinions, and this weren't it. Mercy and weakness are the same thing in war, and there's no prizes for nice behaviour. He'd learned that from Bethod, a long time ago. Maybe now those Easterners would give it a second thought before they came again at night and fucked up everyone's breakfast.

Might help to put some steel in the rest of the Dogman's crew besides, because more than a few were getting itchy. Some lads had tried to get away two nights before. Given up their places and crept over the wall in the darkness, tried to get down into the valley. Bethod had their heads on spears out in front of his ditch now. A dozen battered lumps, hair blowing about in the breeze. You could hardly see their faces from the wall, but it seemed somehow they had an angry, upset sort of a look. Like they blamed the Dogman for leading them to this. As though he hadn't enough to worry about with the reproaches of the living.

He frowned down at Bethod's camp, the shapes of his tents and his signs just starting to come up black out of the mist and the darkness, and he wondered what he could do, except for stand there, and wait. All his boys were looking to him, hoping he'd pull some trick of magic to get them out of

this alive. But Dogman didn't know any magic. A valley, and a wall, and no ways out. No ways out had been the whole point of the plan. He wondered if they could stand another day. But then he'd wondered that yesterday morning.

'What's Bethod planning for today, do we reckon?' he murmured to himself. 'What's he got planned?'

'A massacre?' grunted Grim.

Dogman gave him a hard look. 'Attack is the word I might've picked, but I wouldn't be surprised if we get it your way, before the day's out.' He narrowed his eyes and stared down into the shadowy valley, hoping to see what he'd been hoping for all the last seven long days. Some sign that the Union were coming. But there was nothing. Below Bethod's wide camp, his tents, and his standards, and his masses of men, there was nothing but the bare and empty land, mist clinging in the shady hollows.

Tul nudged him in the ribs with a great big elbow, and managed to make a grin. 'I don't know about this plan. Waiting for the Union, and all that. Sounds a bit risky, if you ask me. Any chance I can change my mind now?'

The Dogman didn't laugh. He hadn't any laughter left. 'Not much.'

'No.' The giant puffed out a weighty sigh. 'I don't suppose there is.'

Seven days, since the Shanka first came at the walls. Seven days, and it felt like seven months. Logen hardly had a muscle that didn't ache from hard use. He was covered in a legion of bruises, a host of scratches, an army of grazes, and knocks, and burns. He had the long cut down his leg bandaged, his ribs all bound up tight from getting kicked in them, a pair of good-sized scabs under his hair, his shoulder stiff as wood from where he'd got battered with a shield, his knuckles scraped and swollen from punching at an Easterner and catching stone instead. He was one enormous sore spot.

The rest of the crowd were little better off. There was hardly a man in the whole fortress without some kind of an injury. Even Crummock's daughter had picked up a scratch from somewhere. One of Shivers' boys had lost himself a finger the day before yesterday. Little one, on his left hand. He was looking at it now, wrapped up tight in dirty, bloody cloth, wincing.

'Burns, don't it?' he said, looking up at Logen, bunching up the rest of his fingers and opening them again.

Logen should've felt sorry for him, probably. He remembered the pain, and the disappointment even worse. Hardly able to believe that you wouldn't have that finger any more, for the whole rest of your life. But he'd got no pity left for anyone beyond himself. 'It surely does,' he grunted.

'Feels like it's still there.'

'Aye.'

'Does that feeling go away?'

'In time.'

'How much time?'

'More than we've got, most likely.'

The man nodded, slow and grim. 'Aye.'

Seven days, and even the cold stone and wet wood of the fortress itself seemed to have had enough. The new parapets were crumbled and sagging, shored up as best they could be, and crumbled again. The gates were chopped to rotten firewood, daylight showing through the hacked-out gaps, boulders piled in behind. A firm knock might have brought them down. A firm knock might have brought Logen down, for that matter, the way he was feeling.

He took a mouthful of sour water from his flask. They were getting to the rank stuff at the bottom of the barrels. Low on food too, and on everything else. Hope, in particular, was in short and dwindling supply. 'Still alive,' he whispered to himself, but there wasn't much triumph in it. Even less than usual. Civilisation might not have been all to his taste, but a soft bed, a strange place to piss, and a bit of scorn from some skinny idiots didn't seem like such a bad option right then. He was busy asking himself for the thousandth time why he came back at all when he heard Crummock-i-Phail's voice behind him.

'Well, well, Bloody-Nine. You look tired, man.'

Logen frowned up. The hillman's mad blather was starting to grate on him. 'It's been hard work these past days, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'I have, and I've had my part in it, haven't I, my beauties?' His three children looked at each other.

'Aye?' said the girl in a tiny voice.

Crummock frowned down at them. 'Don't like the way the game's played no more, eh? How about you, Bloody-Nine? The moon stopped smiling, has it? You scared, are you?'

Logen gave the fat bastard a long, hard look. 'Tired is what I am, Crummock. Tired o' your fortress, your food, and most of all I'm tired of your fucking talk. Not everyone loves the sound o' your fat lips flapping as much as you. Why don't you piss off and see if you can fit the moon up your arse.'

Crummock split a grin, a curve of yellow teeth standing out from his brown beard. 'That's the man I love, right there.' One of his sons, the one that carried the spear with him, was tugging at his shirt. 'What the hell is it, boy?'

'What happens if we lose, Da?'

'If we what?' growled Crummock, and he cuffed his son round the head with a great hand and knocked him on his face in the dirt. 'On your feet! There'll be no losing here, boy!'

'Not while the moon loves us,' muttered his sister, but not that loud.

Logen watched the lad struggling up, holding a hand to his bloody mouth and looking like he wanted to cry. He knew that feeling. Probably he should've said something about treating a child that way. Maybe he would've, on the first day, or the second even. Not now. He was too tired, and too sore, and too scared to care much about it.

Black Dow ambled up, something not too far from a smile across his face. The one man in the whole camp who might've been said to be in a better mood than usual, and you know you're in some sorry shit when Black Dow starts smiling.

'Ninefingers,' he grunted.

'Dow. Run out of men to burn, have you?'

'Reckon Bethod'll be sending me some more presently.' He nodded towards

the wall. 'What d'you think he'll send today?'

'After what we gave 'em last night, I reckon those Crinna bastards are just about done.'

'Bloody savages. I reckon they are at that.'

'And there've been no Shanka for a few days now.'

'Four days, since he sent the Flatheads at us.'

Logen squinted up at the sky, slowly getting lighter. 'Looks like good weather today. Good weather for armour, and swords, and men walking shoulder to shoulder. Good weather to try and finish us. Wouldn't be surprised if he sends the Carls today.'

'Nor me.'

'His best,' said Logen, 'from way back. Wouldn't be surprised to see Whitesides, and Goring, and Pale-as-Snow, and fucking Littlebone and all the rest come strolling up to the gate after breakfast.'

Dow snorted. 'His best? Right crowd o' cunts, those.' And he turned his head and spat onto the mud.

'You'll get no argument from me.'

'That so? Didn't you fight alongside 'em, all those hard and bloody years?'

'I did. But I can't say I ever much liked 'em.'

'Well, if it's any consolation, I doubt they think too much o' you these days.' Dow gave him a long look. 'When did Bethod stop suiting you, eh, Ninefingers?'

Logen stared back at him. 'Hard to say. Bit by bit, I reckon. Maybe he got to be more of a bastard as time went on. Or maybe I got to be less of one.'

'Or maybe there ain't room on one side for two bastards as big as the pair o' you.'

'Oh, I don't know.' Logen got up. 'You and me work real sweet together.' He stalked away from Dow, thinking about what easy work Malacus Quai, and Ferro Maljinn, and even Jezal dan Luthar had been.

Seven days, and they were all at each other's throats. All angry, all tired. Seven days. The one consolation was that there couldn't be many more.

'They're coming.'

Dogman's eyes flicked sideways. Like most of the few things Grim said, it hardly needed saying. They could all see it as clearly as the sun rising. Bethod's Carls were on the move.

They were in no hurry. They came on stiff and steady, painted shields held up in front, eyes to the gateway. Standards flapped over their heads. Signs the Dogman recognised from way back. He wondered how many of those men down there he'd fought alongside. How many of their faces he could put a name to. How many he'd drunk with, eaten with, laughed with, that he'd have to do his best to put back in the mud. He took a long breath. The battlefield's no place for sentiment, Threetrees had told him once, and he'd taken it right to heart.

'Alright!' He lifted up his hand as the men around him on the tower readied their bows, 'Hold on to 'em for a minute yet!'

The Carls stomped on through the churned-up mud and the broken rocks where the valley narrowed, past the bodies of Easterners, and Shanka, left twisted where they lay, hacked, or crushed, or stuck with broken arrows. They didn't falter, or lose a step, the wall of shields shifted as they came, but didn't break. Not the slightest gap.

'They march tight,' muttered Tul.

'Aye. Too tight, the bastards.'

They were getting close, now. Close enough that Dogman had to try some arrows. 'Alright, boys! Aim high and let 'em drop!' The first flight went hissing from the tower, arced up high and started to fall on that tight column. They shifted their shields to meet them and arrows thudded into painted wood, spun off helmets and glanced off mail. A couple found marks, a shriek went up. Holes showed, here or there, but the rest just stepped on over, trudging up towards the wall.

Dogman frowned at the barrels where the shafts were kept. Less than quarter full, now, and most of those dug out from dead men. 'Careful now! Pick your marks, lads!'

'Uh,' said Grim, pointing down below. A good-sized pack o' men were scurrying out from the ditch, dressed in stiff leather and steel capped. They formed up in a few neat rows, kneeling down, tending to their weapons. Flatbows, like the Union used.

'Get down!' shouted Dogman.

Those nasty little bows rattled and spat. Most of the boys on the tower were well behind their parapet by then, but one optimist who'd been leaning out got a bolt through his mouth, swayed and toppled, silent, off the tower. Another took one in his chest, breathing with a wheeze like wind through a split pine.

'Alright! Give 'em something back!' They all came up at once and sent down a volley, strings humming, peppering those bastards with plunging shafts. Their bows might not have had the same spit to 'em, but with the height the arrows still came hard, and Bethod's archers had nothing to hide behind. More than a few fell back or started crawling away, screaming and squealing, but the rank behind pushed through, slow and steady, knelt down and aimed their flatbows.

Another flight of bolts came hissing up. Men ducked and threw themselves down. One zipped right past the Dogman's head and clicked off the rock face behind. Pure luck he didn't get pinned with it. A couple of the others were less lucky. One lad was lying on his back, a pair of bolts stuck in his chest, peering down at 'em and whispering, 'shit', to himself, over and over.

'Bastards!'

'Let 'em have it back!'

Shafts and bolts started flapping up both ways, men shouting and taking aim, all anger and gritted teeth. 'Steady!' shouted Dogman, 'steady!' but no one hardly heard him. With the extra poke from the height and the cover they had from the walls, didn't take long for Dogman's boys to get the upper hand. Bethod's archers started scrambling back, then a couple dropped their flatbows and made a run for it, one getting a shaft right through his back. The rest started to break for the ditch, leaving their wounded crawling in the mud.

'Uh,' said Grim again. While they'd been busy trading shafts the Carls had made it right to the gate, shields up over their heads against the rocks and arrows the hillmen were chucking down. They'd got the ditch filled in a day or two before, and now the column opened up in the middle and those mailed men moved like they were passing something to the front. Dogman caught a glimpse of it. A long, thin tree trunk, cut down to use as a ram, branches left on short so men could give it a firm swing. Dogman heard the first tearing crash of it working at their sorry excuse for a gate.

'Shit,' he muttered.

Knots of Thralls were charging forward now, light-armed and light-armoured, carrying ladders between 'em, counting on speed to make it to the walls. Plenty fell, pricked with spear or arrow, knocked with rocks. Some of their ladders were pushed back, but they were quick and full of bones, and stuck to their task. Soon there were a couple of groups on the walls while more pressed up the ladders behind, fighting with Crummock's people and getting the better by pure freshness and weight of numbers.

Now there was a big crack and the gate went down. Dogman saw that tree-trunk swing one last time and cave one door right in. The Carls struggled with the other and heaved it open, a couple of stones bouncing from the shields and spinning away. The front few started pressing forwards through the gate.

'Shit,' said Grim.

'They're through,' breathed the Dogman, and he watched Bethod's Carls push on into that narrow gap in a mailed tide, trampling the shattered gates under their heavy boots, dragging the rocks behind out of the way, their bright-painted shields up, their bright-polished weapons ready. To either side the Thralls swarmed up their ladders and onto the wall, pressing Crummock's hillmen back down the walkways. Like a high river bursting a dam, Bethod's host flowed into the broken fortress, first in a trickle, and soon in a flood.

'I'm going down!' snarled Tul, dragging his great long sword out of its sheath.

Dogman thought about trying to stop him, but then he just nodded, tired, and watched the Thunderhead charge off down the steps, a few others following. There was no point getting in their way. Seemed like it was fast reaching that time.

Time for each man to choose where he'd die.

Logen saw them come through the gates, up the ramp and into the fortress. Time seemed to move slow. He saw each design on each shield picked out sharp in the morning sun – black tree, red bridge, two wolves on green, three horses on yellow. Metal glinted and flashed – shield's rim, mail's ring, spear's point, sword's edge. On they came, yelling their battle cries, high and thin, the way they'd done for years. The breath crawled in and out of Logen's nose. The Thralls and the hillmen fought on the walls as if they were underwater, their sounds dull and muffled. His palms sweated, and tickled, and itched as he watched the Carls break in. Hardly seemed as if it could be true that he had to charge into those bastards and kill as many as he could. What a damn fool

notion.

He felt that powerful need, as he always had at times like that, to turn and run. All around he felt the fear of the others, their uncertain shuffling, their edging backwards. A sensible enough instinct, except there was nowhere now to run to. Nowhere except forwards, into the teeth of the enemy, and hope to drive them out before they could get a foothold. There was nothing to think about. It was their only chance.

So Logen lifted the Maker's sword high, and he gave a meaningless scream, and he started running. He heard the shouts around him, felt the men moving with him, the jostling and rattling of weapons. The ground, and the wall, and the Carls he ran at jolted and wobbled. His boots pounded on the earth, his own quick breath hissed and rushed with the wind.

He saw the Carls hurrying to set their shields, to form a wall, to make ready their spears and their weapons, but they were in a mess after coming through that narrow gate, flustered by the screaming mass of men charging down on them. The war-cries died in their throats and their faces sagged from triumph to shock. A couple at the edges started to have doubts, and they faltered, and shuffled back, and then Logen and the rest were on them.

He managed to twist around a wobbling spear and land a good hard chop on a shield with all the force of his charge, knock his man sprawling in the mud. Logen hacked at his leg as he tried to get up and the blade cut through mail and left a long gash in flesh, brought him shrieking down again. Logen swung at another Carl, felt the Maker's sword squeal against the metal rim of a shield and slide into flesh. A man gurgled, vomited blood down the front of his mail coat.

Logen saw an axe thud into a helmet and leave a dent the size of a fist in it. He reeled out of the way of a spear thrust and it stuck in the ribs of a man beside him. A sword hacked into a shield and sent splinters flying into Logen's eyes. He blinked, and dodged, slid in the muck, chopped at an arm as it tore at his coat and felt it break, flapping in its mail sleeve. Eyes rolled in a bloody face. Something shoved him in the back and nearly pushed him onto a sword.

There was hardly space to swing, then there was no space at all. Men crushed in from behind, crushed in through the gate, adding their straining, mindless weight to the press in the centre. Logen was squashed in tight, shoulder to shoulder. Men gasped and grunted, dug and elbowed at each other, stabbed with knives and gouged at faces with their fingers. He thought he saw Littlebone in the press, teeth bared in a snarl, long grey hair straggling out from under a helmet set with whirls of gold, spattered with streaks of red, shouting himself hoarse. Logen tried to press towards him but the blind currents of battle snatched him away and carried them far apart.

He stabbed at someone under a shield rim, winced as he felt something dig into his hip. A long, slow, burning, getting worse and worse. He growled as the blade cut, not swung, or thrust, just held there while he was squashed up against it. He thrashed with his elbows, with his head, managed to twist away from the pain, felt the wetness of blood down his leg. He found himself with room, got his sword-hand free, hacked at a shield, chopped a head open on the backswing then found himself shoved up against it, his face pressed into warm brains.

He saw a shield jerk up out of the corner of his eye. The edge caught him in the throat, under the chin, snapped his head back and filled his skull with blinding light. Before he knew it he was rolling, coughing, slithering in the filth down among the boots.

He dragged himself nowhere, clutching at dirt, spitting blood, boots squelching and straining in the mud all around him. Crawling through a dark, terrifying, shifting forest of legs, the screams of pain and rage filtering down from above with the flickering light. Feet kicked at him, stomped on him, battered at every part of him. He tried to struggle up and a boot in the mouth sent him limp again. He rolled over, gasping, saw a bearded Carl in the same state, impossible to say which side he was on, trying to push himself up out of the mud. Their eyes met, for a moment, then a glinting spear blade shot down from above and stabbed the Carl in the back, once, twice, three times. He went limp, blood gurgling down through his beard. There were bodies all around, on their faces and their sides, lying in amongst the dropped and broken gear, kicked and knocked around like children's dolls, some of them still twitching, clutching, grunting.

Logen squawked as a boot squelched down hard on his hand, crushing his fingers into the muck. He fumbled a knife from his belt and started slashing weakly at the leg above it, bloody teeth gritted. Something cracked him in the top of the head and sent him sprawling on his face again.

The world was a noisy blur, a painful smear, a mass of feet and anger. He didn't know which way he was facing, which way was up or down. His mouth tasted of metal, thirsty. There was blood in his eyes, mud in his eyes, his head was pounding, he wanted to be sick.

Back to the North, and get some vengeance. What the fuck had he been thinking?

Someone screamed, stuck with a flatbow bolt, but the Dogman had no time to worry about him.

Whitesides' Thralls were up on the wall under the tower, and a few had got around and onto the stairway. They were charging up it now, or as close as they could get to a charge on those narrow steps. Dogman dropped his bow and fumbled his sword out from its sheath, got a knife ready in the other hand. A few of the others took up spears, gathered round the head of the stairway as the Thralls came up. Dogman swallowed. He'd never been much for fights like this, toe to toe, no more'n the length of an axe from your enemies. He'd rather have kept things to a polite distance, but that didn't seem to be what these bastards had in mind.

An awkward kind of a fight started up at the top of the steps, defenders poking with spears, trying to shove the Thralls off, them poking back, shoving with shields, trying to get a foothold on the platform at the top, everyone taking care in case they took the long drop right back to the mud.

One charged through with a spear, screaming at the top of his lungs, and Grim shot him in the face, cool as you like, no more'n a stride or two distant. He staggered a step or two, bent right over with the flights of the arrows

sticking out his mouth and the point out the back of his neck, then Dogman took the top of his head off with his sword and sent his corpse sprawling.

A big Thrall with wild red hair leaped up the steps, swinging a big axe, roaring like a madman. He got round a spear and felled an archer with a blow that spattered blood across the rock face, charged on through, folk scattering out o' the way.

Dogman dithered, trying to look like he was an idiot, then when the axe came down he dodged left and the blade missed him by a whisker. The red-haired Thrall stumbled, tired from getting over the wall and up all them steps, most likely. A long way to climb, especially with nothing but your death at the end of it. Dogman kicked hard at the side of his knee and his leg buckled, he yelled as he lurched towards the edge of the stairs. Dogman chopped at him with his sword, caught him a slash across the back, hard enough to send him over the edge. He dropped his axe, screamed as he tumbled through the empty air.

Dogman felt something move, turned just in time to see another Thrall coming at him from the side. He twisted round and knocked the first sword-cut clear, gasped as he felt the second thud cold into his arm, heard his sword clatter out of his limp hand. He jerked away from another swing, tripped and went down on his back. The Thrall came at him, lifting up his sword to finish the job, but before he got more'n a stride Grim loomed up quick from the side, caught hold of his sword-arm and held it pinned. Dogman scrambled up, taking a hard grip on his knife with his good hand, and stabbed the Thrall right in his chest. They stayed there, the three of 'em, tangled up tight together, still in the midst of all that madness, for as long as it took for the man to die. Then Dogman pulled his knife free and Grim let him fall.

They'd got the best of it up on the tower, at least for now. There was just one Thrall left on his feet, and while the Dogman watched a couple of his lads herded him up to the parapet and poked him off with spears. There were corpses scattered all about the place. A couple of dozen Thralls, maybe half that many of the Dogman's boys. One of 'em was propped against the cliff face, chest heaving as he breathed, face pasty pale, bloody hands clutched to his slashed guts.

Dogman's hand wouldn't work right, the fingers dangled useless. He tugged his shirtsleeve up, saw a long gash oozing from his elbow almost all the way to his wrist. His guts gave a heave and he coughed a bit of burning puke up and spat it out. Wounds on other people you can get used to. Cuts out of your own flesh always have a horror to 'em.

Down below, inside the wall, the fight was joined and nothing but a boiling, tight-pressed mass. Dogman could hardly tell which men were on which side. He stood frozen, bloody knife clutched in one bloody hand. There were no answers now, no plans. It was every man for himself. If they lived out the day it would be by luck alone, and he was starting to doubt he had that much luck left. He felt someone tugging at his sleeve. Grim. He followed his pointed finger with his eyes.

Beyond Bethod's camp, down in the valley, a great cloud of dust was coming up, a brown haze. Underneath, glittering in the morning sun, the armour of horsemen. His hand clamped tight round Grim's wrist, hope

suddenly flickering alive again. 'Fucking Union!' he breathed, hardly daring to believe it.

West squinted through his eye-glass, lowered it and peered up the valley, squinted through it again. 'You're sure?'

'Yes, sir.' Jalenhorm's big, honest face was streaked with the dirt of eight days' hard riding. 'And it looks as if they're still holding out, just barely.'

'General Poulder!' snapped West.

'My Lord Marshal?' murmured Poulder with his newly acquired veneer of sycophancy.

'Are the cavalry ready to charge?'

The General blinked. 'They are not properly deployed, have been riding hard these past days, and would be charging uphill over broken ground and at a strong and determined enemy. They will do as you order, of course, Lord Marshal, but it might be prudent to wait for our infantry to—'

'Prudence is a luxury.' West frowned up towards that innocuous space between the two fells. Attack at once, while the Dogman and his Northmen still held out? They might enjoy the advantage of surprise, and crush Bethod between them, but the cavalry would be charging uphill, men and mounts disorganised and fatigued from hard marching. Or wait for the infantry to arrive, still some hours behind, and mount a well-planned assault? But by then would the Dogman and his friends have been slaughtered to a man, their fortress taken and Bethod well prepared to meet an attack from one side only?

West chewed at his lip, trying to ignore the fact that thousands of lives hung upon his decision. To attack now was the greater risk, but might offer the greater rewards. A chance to finish this war within a bloody hour. They might never again catch the King of the Northmen off guard. What was it that Burr had said to him, the night before he died? One cannot be a great leader without a certain . . . ruthlessness.

'Prepare the charge, and deploy our infantry across the mouth of the valley as soon as they arrive. We must prevent Bethod and any of his forces from escaping. If sacrifices are to be made, I intend that they be meaningful.' Poulder looked anything but convinced. 'Will you force me to agree with General Kroy's assessment of your fighting qualities, General Poulder? Or do you intend to prove the two of us wrong?'

The General snapped to attention, his moustaches vibrating with new eagerness. 'Respectfully, sir, to prove you wrong! I will order the charge immediately!'

He gave his black charger the spurs and flew off up the valley, towards the place where the dusty cavalry were massing, pursued by several members of his staff. West shifted in his saddle, chewing worriedly at his lip. His head was beginning to hurt again. A charge, uphill, against a determined enemy.

Colonel Glokta would no doubt have grinned at the prospect of such a deadly gamble. Prince Ladisla would have approved of such cavalier carelessness with other men's lives. Lord Smund would have slapped backs, and talked of vim and vigour, and called for wine.

And only look what became of those three heroes.

Logen heard a great roar, faint, and far away. Light came at his half-closed eyes, as though the fight was opened up wide. Shadows flickered. A great boot squelched in the filth in front of his face. Voices bellowed, far above. He felt himself grabbed by the shirt, dragged through the mud, feet and legs thrashing all around him. He saw the sky, painful bright, blinked and dribbled at it. He lay still, limp as a rag.

‘Logen! You alright? Where you hurt?’

‘I—’ he croaked, then started coughing.

‘D’you know me?’ Something slapped at Logen’s face, slapped some sluggish thought into his head. A shaggy shape loomed over him, dark against the bright sky. Logen squinted at it. Tul Duru Thunderhead, unless he was much mistaken. What the hell was he doing here? Thinking was painful. The more Logen thought, the more pain he was in. His jaw was on fire, feeling twice the size it usually did. His every breath was a shuddering, slaving gasp.

Above him the big man’s mouth moved, and the words boomed and rang against Logen’s ears, but they were nothing but noise. His leg prickled unpleasantly, far away, his own heartbeat leaped and jerked and pounded at his head. He heard sounds, clashing and rattling, coming at him from all sides, and the sounds themselves hurt him, made his jaw burn all the worse, unbearable.

‘Get . . .’ The air rasped and clicked, but no sound would come. It wasn’t his voice any longer. He reached out, with his last strength, and he put his palm against Tul’s chest, and he tried to push him away, but the big man only caught his hand and pressed it with his own.

‘It’s alright,’ he growled. ‘I’ve got you.’

‘Aye,’ whispered Logen, and the smile spread out across his bloody mouth. He gripped that great hand with a sudden, terrible strength, and with his other fist he found the handle of a knife, tucked down warm against his skin. The good blade darted out, swift as the snake and just as deadly, and sank into the big man’s thick neck to the hilt. He looked surprised, as the hot blood poured from his open throat, drooled from his open mouth, soaked his heavy beard, dribbled from his nose and down his chest, but he shouldn’t have.

To touch the Bloody-Nine was to touch death, and death has no favourites, and makes no exceptions.

The Bloody-Nine rose up, shoving the great corpse away from him, and his red fist closed tight around the giant’s sword, a heavy length of star-bright metal, dark and beautiful, a righteous tool for the work that awaited him. So much work.

But good work is the best of blessings. The Bloody-Nine opened his mouth, and shrieked out all his bottomless love and his endless hate in one long wail. The ground rushed underneath him, and the heaving, writhing, beautiful battle reached out and took him in its soft embrace, and he was home.

The faces of the dead shifted, blurred around him, roaring their curses and bellowing their anger. But their hate of him only made him stronger. The long

sword flung men out of his path and left them twisted and broken, hacked and drooling, howling with happiness. Who fought who was none of his concern. The living were on one side, and he was on the other, and he carved a red and righteous way through their ranks.

An axe flashed in the sun, a bright curve like the waning moon, and the Bloody-Nine slid below it, kicked a man away with a heavy boot. He lifted up a shield, but the great sword split the painted tree, and the wood beneath it, and the arm beneath that, and tore open the mail behind as though it was nothing but a cobweb, and split his belly like a sack of angry snakes.

A boy-child cowered, and slithered away on his back, clutching at a great shield and an axe too big for him to lift. The Bloody-Nine laughed at his fear, teeth bared bright and smiling. A tiny voice seemed to whisper for restraint, but the Bloody-Nine hardly heard it. His sword hard-swung split big shield and small body together and sprayed blood across the dirt and the stone and the stricken faces of the men watching.

‘Good,’ he said, and he showed his bloody smile. He was the Great Leveller. Man or woman, young or old, all were dealt with exactly alike. That was the brutal beauty of it, the awful symmetry of it, the perfect justice of it. There could be no escape and no excuses. He came forward, taller than the mountains, and the men shuffled, and muttered, and spread out from him. A circle of shields, of painted designs, of flowering trees, and rippling water, and snarling faces.

Their words tickled at his ears.

‘It’s him.’

‘Ninefingers.’

‘The Bloody-Nine!’

A circle of fear, with him at the centre, and they were wise to fear.

Their deaths were written in the shapes of sweet blood on the bitter ground. Their deaths were whispered in the buzzing of the flies on the corpses beyond the wall. Their deaths were stamped on their faces, carried on the wind, held in the crooked line between the mountains and the sky. Dead men, all.

‘Who’s next to the mud?’ he whispered.

A bold Carl stepped forward, a shield on his arm with a coiled serpent upon it. Before he could even lift his spear the Bloody-Nine’s sword had made a great circle, above the top of his shield and below the bottom of his helmet. The point of the blade stole the jawbone from his head, cleaved into the shoulder of the next man, ate deep into his chest and drove him into the earth, blood flying from his silent mouth. Another man loomed up and the sword fell on him like a falling star, crushed his helmet and the skull beneath it down to his mouth. The body dropped on its back and danced a merry jig in the dirt.

‘Dance!’ laughed the Bloody-Nine, and the sword reeled around him. He filled the air with blood, and broken weapons, and the parts of men, and these good things wrote secret letters, and described sacred patterns that only he could see and understand. Blades pricked and nicked and dug at him but they were nothing. He repaid each mark upon his burning skin one-hundred fold, and the Bloody-Nine laughed, and the wind, and the fire, and the faces on the shields laughed with him, and could not stop.

He was the storm in the High Places, his voice as terrible as the thunder, his

arm as quick, as deadly, as pitiless as the lightning. He rammed the sword through a man's guts, ripped it back and smashed a man's mouth apart with the pommel, snatched his spear away with his free hand and flung it through the neck of a third, split a Carl's side yawning open as he passed. He reeled, spun, rolled, drunken dizzy, spitting fire and laughter. He forged a new circle about him. A circle as wide as the giant's sword. A circle in which the world belonged to him.

His enemies lurked beyond its limit now, shuffled back from it, full of fear. They knew him, he could see it in their faces. They had heard whispers of his work, and now he had given them a bloody lesson, and they knew the truth of it, and he smiled to see them enlightened. The foremost of them held up his open hand, bent forward and laid his axe down on the ground.

'You are forgiven,' whispered the Bloody-Nine, and let his own sword clatter to the dirt. Then he darted forward and seized the man by his throat, lifting him up into the air with both his hands. He thrashed and kicked and wrestled, but the Bloody-Nine's red grip was the swelling ice that bursts the very bones of the earth apart.

'You are forgiven!' His hands were made of iron, and his thumbs sunk deeper and deeper into the man's neck until blood welled up from under them, and he lifted the kicking corpse out to arm's length and held it above him until it was still. He flung it away, and it fell upon the mud and flopped over and over in a manner that greatly pleased him.

'Forgiven . . . ' He walked to the bright archway through a cringing crowd, shying away like sheep from the wolf, leaving a muddy path through their midst, strewn with their fallen shields and weapons. Beyond, in the sun, bright-armoured horsemen moved across the dusty valley, their swords twinkling as they rose and fell, herding running figures this way and that, riding between the high standards, rippling gently in the wind. He stood in that ragged gateway, with the splintered doors under his boots, and the corpses of his friends and of his enemies scattered about him, and he heard the sounds of men cheering victory.

And Logen closed his eyes, and breathed.

Too Many Masters

In spite of the hot summer day outside, the banking hall was a cool, dim, shadowy place. A place full of whispers, and quiet echoes, built of sharp, dark marble like a new tomb. Such thin shafts of sunlight as broke through the narrow windows were full of wriggling dust motes. There was no smell to speak of. *Except the stench of dishonesty, which even I find almost overpowering. The surroundings may be cleaner than the House of Questions, but I suspect there is more truth told among the criminals.*

There were no piles of shining gold ingots on display. There was not so much as a single coin in evidence. Only pens, and ink, and heaps of dull paper. Valint and Balk's employees were not swaddled in fabulous robes such as Magister Kault of the Mercers had worn. They did not sport flashing jewels as Magister Eider of the Spicers had. They were small, grey-dressed men with serious expressions. The only flashing was from the odd pair of studious eye-glasses.

So this is what true wealth looks like. This is how true power appears. The austere temple of the golden goddess. He watched the clerks working at their neat stacks of documents, at their neat desks arranged in neat rows. *There the acolytes, inducted into the lowest mysteries of the church.* His eyes flickered to those waiting. Merchants and moneylenders, shopkeepers and shysters, traders and tricksters in long queues, or waiting nervously on hard chairs around the hard walls. Fine clothes, perhaps, but anxious manners. *The fearful congregation, ready to cower should the deity of commerce show her vengeful streak.*

But I am not her creature. Glokta shouldered his way past the longest queue, the tip of his cane squealing loud against the tiles, snarling, 'I am crippled!' if one of the merchants dared to look his way.

The clerk blinked at him when he reached the front of the line. 'How may I —'

'Mauthis,' barked Glokta.

'And who shall I say is—'

'The cripple.' *Convey me to the high priest, that I might cleanse my crimes in banking notes.*

'I cannot simply—'

'You are expected!' Another clerk, a few rows back, had stood up from his desk. 'Please come with me.'

Glokta gave the unhappy queue a toothless leer as he limped out between the desks toward a door in the far, panelled wall, but his smile did not last. Beyond it, a set of high steps rose up, light filtering down from a narrow window at the top.

What is it about power, that it has to be higher up than everyone else? Can a man not be powerful on the ground floor? He cursed and struggled up after his

impatient guide, then dragged his useless leg down a long hallway with many high doors on either side. The clerk leaned forward and humbly knocked at one, waited for a muffled 'Yes?' and opened it.

Mauthis sat behind a monumental desk watching Glokta hobble over the threshold. His face could have been carved from wood for all the warmth or welcome it displayed. On the expanse of blood-coloured leather before him pens, and ink, and neat piles of papers were arranged with all the merciless precision of recruits on a parade ground.

'The visitor you were expecting, sir.' The clerk hastened forward with a sheaf of documents. 'And there are also these for your attention.'

Mauthis turned his emotionless eyes to them. 'Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . all these to Talins . . .' Glokta did not wait to be asked. And I've been in pain for far too long to pretend not to be. He took a lurching step and sagged into the nearest chair, stiff leather creaking uncomfortably under his aching arse. But it will serve.

The papers crackled as Mauthis leafed through them, his pen scratching his name at the bottom of each one. He paused at the last. 'And no. This must be called in at once.' He reached forward and took hold of a stamp, its wooden handle polished by long use, and rocked it carefully in its tray of red ink. It thumped down against the paper with a disturbing finality. *And is some merchant's life squashed out under that stamp, do we suppose? Is that ruin and despair, so carelessly administered? Is that wives and children, out upon the street? There is no blood here, there are no screams, and yet men are destroyed as completely as they are in the House of Questions, and with a fraction of the effort.*

Glokta's eyes followed the clerk as he hurried out with the documents. Or is it merely a receipt for ten bits, refused? Who can say? The door was pulled softly and precisely shut with the gentlest of smooth clicks.

Mauthis paused only to align his pen precisely with the edge of his desk, then he looked up at Glokta. 'I am truly grateful that you have answered promptly.'

Glokta snorted. 'The tone of your note did not seem to allow for delay.' He winced as he lifted his aching leg with both hands and heaved his dirty boot up onto the chair beside him. 'I hope you will return the favour and come promptly to the point. I am extremely busy.' *I have Magi to destroy, and Kings to bring down, and, if I cannot do one or the other, I have a pressing appointment to have my throat cut and be tossed in the sea.*

Mauthis' face did not so much as flicker. 'Once again, I find that my superiors are not best pleased with the direction of your investigations.'

Is that so? 'Your superiors are people of deep pockets and shallow patience. What now offends their delicate sensibilities?'

'Your investigation into the lineage of our new King, his August Majesty Jezal the First.' Glokta felt his eye twitch, and he pressed his hand against it with a sour sucking of his gums. 'In particular your enquiries into the person of Carmee dan Roth, the circumstances of her untimely demise, and the closeness of her friendship with our previous King, Guslav the Fifth. Do I come close enough to the point for your taste?'

A little closer than I would like, in fact. 'Those enquiries have scarcely even begun. I find it surprising that your superiors are so very well informed. Do

they acquire their information from a crystal ball, or a magic mirror?' *Or from someone at the House of Questions who likes to talk? Or from someone closer to me even than that, perhaps?*

Mauthis sighed, or at least, he allowed some air to issue from his face. 'I told you to assume that they know everything. You will discover it is no exaggeration, particularly if you choose to try and deceive them. I would advise you very strongly against that course of action.'

'Believe me when I say,' muttered Glokta through tight lips, 'that I have no interest whatsoever in the King's parentage, but his Eminence has demanded it, and keenly awaits a report of my progress. What am I to tell him?'

Mauthis stared back with a face full of sympathy. As much sympathy as one stone might have for another. 'My employers do not care what you tell him, provided that you obey them. I see that you find yourself in a difficult position, but speaking plainly, Superior, I do not see a choice for you. I suppose you could go to the Arch Lector, and lay before him the whole history of our involvement. The gift you took from my employers, the conditions under which it was given, the consideration you have already extended to us. Perhaps his Eminence is more forgiving of divided loyalties than he appears to be.'

'Huh,' snorted Glokta. *If I did not know better, I might have almost taken that for a joke. His Eminence is only slightly less forgiving than a scorpion, and we both know it.*

'Or you could honour your commitment to my employers, and do as they demand.'

'They asked for favours, when I signed the damn receipt. Now they make demands? Where does it end?'

'That is not for me to say, Superior. Or for you to ask.' Mauthis' eyes flickered towards the door. He leaned across his desk and spoke soft and low. 'But if my own experience is anything to go by . . . it will not end. My employers have paid. And they always get what they have paid for. Always.'

Glokta swallowed. *It would seem that, in this case, they have paid for my abject obedience. It would not normally be a difficulty, of course, I am every bit as abject as the next man, if not more so. But the Arch Lector demands the same. Two well-informed and merciless masters in direct opposition begins too late to seem like one too many. Two too many, some might say. But as Mauthis so kindly explains, I have no choice.* He slid his boot off the chair, leaving a long streak of dirt across the leather, and shifted his weight painfully as he began the long process of getting up. 'Is there anything else, or do your employers merely wish me to defy the most powerful man in the Union?'

'They wish you also to watch him.'

Glokta froze. 'They wish me to what?'

'There has been a great deal of change of late, Superior. Change means new opportunities, but too much change is bad for business. My employers feel a period of stability is in everyone's best interests. They are satisfied with the situation.' Mauthis clenched his pale hands together on the red leather. 'They are concerned that some figures within the government may not be satisfied. That they may seek further change. That their rash actions might lead to chaos. His Eminence concerns them especially. They wish to know what he

does. What he plans. They wish, in particular, to know what he is doing in the University.'

Glokta gave a splutter of disbelieving laughter. 'Is that all?'

The irony was wasted on Mauthis. 'For now. It might be best if you were to leave by the back entrance. My employers will expect news within the week.'

Glokta grimaced as he struggled down the narrow staircase at the back of the building, sideways on like a crab, the sweat standing out from his forehead, and not just from the effort. *How could they know? First that I was looking into Prince Raynault's death, against the Arch Lector's orders, and now that I am looking into our Majesty's mother, on the Arch Lector's behalf? Assume they know everything, of course, but no one knows anything without being told.*

Who . . . told?

Who asked the questions, about the Prince and about the King? Whose first loyalty is to money? Who has already given me up once to save his skin? Glokta paused for a moment, in the middle of the steps, and frowned. *Oh, dear, dear. Is it every man for himself, now? Has it always been?*

The pain shooting up his wasted leg was the only reply.

Sweet Victory

West sat, arms crossed upon his saddle-bow, staring numbly up the dusty valley. 'We won,' said Pike, in a voice without emotion. Just the same voice in which he might have said, 'We lost.'

A couple of tattered standards still stood, hanging lifeless. Bethod's own great banner had been torn down and trampled beneath horses' hooves, and now its threadbare frame stuck up at a twisted angle, above the settling fog of dust, like clean-picked bones. A fitting symbol for the sudden fall of the King of the Northmen.

Poulder reined in his horse beside West, smiling primly at the carnage like a schoolmaster at an orderly classroom.

'How did we fare, General?'

'Casualties appear to have been heavy, sir, especially in our front ranks, but the enemy were largely taken by surprise. Most of their best troops were already committed to the attack on the fortress. Once our cavalry got them on the run, we drove them all the way to the walls! Picked their camp clean.' Poulder wrinkled his nose, moustaches trembling with distaste. 'Several hundred of those devilish Shanka we put to the sword, and a much greater number we drove off into the hills to the north, from whence, I do not doubt, they will be greatly reluctant to return. We wrought a slaughter among the Northmen to satisfy King Casamir himself, and the rest have laid down their arms. We guess at five thousand prisoners, sir. Bethod's army has been quite crushed. Crushed!' He gave a girlish chuckle. 'No one could deny that you have well and truly avenged the death of Crown Prince Ladisla today, Lord Marshal!'

West swallowed. 'Of course. Well and truly avenged.'

'A master-stroke, to use our Northmen as a decoy. A bold and a decisive manoeuvre. I am, and will always be, honoured to have played my small part! A famous day for Union arms! Marshal Burr would have been proud to see it!'

West had never in his life expected to receive praise from General Poulder, but now the great moment had come he found that he could take no pleasure in it. He had performed no acts of bravery. He had taken no risks with his own life. He had done nothing but say charge. He felt saddle-sore and bone-weary, his jaw ached from being constantly clenched with worry. Even speaking seemed an effort. 'Is Bethod among the dead, or the captured?'

'As to specific prisoners, sir, I could not say. It may be that our Northern allies have him.' Poulder gave vent to a jagged chuckle. 'In which case I doubt he'll be with us much longer, eh, Marshal? Eh, Sergeant Pike?' He grinned as he drew his finger sharply across his belly and clicked his tongue. 'The bloody cross for him, I shouldn't wonder! Isn't that what they do, these savages? The bloody cross, isn't it?'

West did not see the funny side. 'Ensure that our prisoners are given food

and water, and such assistance with their wounded as we are able to provide. We should be gracious in victory.' It seemed like the sort of thing that a leader should say, after a battle.

'Quite so, my Lord Marshal.' And Poulder gave a smart salute, the very model of an obedient underling, then reined his mount sideways and spurred away.

West slid down from his own horse, gathered himself for a moment, and began to trudge on foot up the valley. Pike came after him, sword drawn.

'Can't be too careful, sir,' he said.

'No,' murmured West. 'I suppose not.'

The long slope was scattered with men, alive and dead. The corpses of Union horsemen lay where they had fallen. Surgeons tended to the wounded with bloody hands and grim faces. Some men sat and wept, perhaps by fallen comrades. Some stared numbly at their own wounds. Others howled and gurgled, screamed for help, or water. Still others rushed to bring it to them. Final kindnesses, for the dying. A long procession of sullen prisoners was winding down the valley alongside the rock wall, watched carefully by mounted Union soldiers. Nearby were tangled heaps of surrendered weapons, piles of mail coats, stacks of painted shields.

West picked his way slowly through what had been Bethod's camp, rendered in one furious half-hour into a great expanse of rubbish, scattered across the bare rock and the hard earth. The twisted bodies of men and horses were mixed in with the trampled frames of tents, ripped and dragged-out canvas, burst barrels, broken boxes, gear for cooking, and mending, and fighting. All trodden into the churned mud, stamped with the smeared prints of hooves and boots.

In the midst of all this chaos there were strange islands of calm, where all seemed undisturbed, just as it must have been before West ordered the charge. A pot still hung over a smouldering fire, stew bubbling inside. A set of spears were neatly stacked against each other, with stool and whetstone beside, ready to be sharpened. Three bedrolls formed a perfect triangle, blankets well folded at the head of each one, all neat and orderly, except that a man lay sprawled across them, the contents of his gaping skull splattered across the pale wool.

Not far beyond a Union officer knelt in the mud, cradling another in his arms. West felt a sick twinge of recognition. The one on his knees was his old friend Lieutenant Brint. The one lying limp was his old friend Lieutenant Kaspas. For some reason, West felt an almost overpowering urge to walk away, off up the slope without stopping, and pretend not to have seen them. He had to force himself to stride over, his mouth filling with sour spit.

Brint looked up, pale face streaked with tears. 'An arrow,' he whispered. 'Just a stray. He never even drew his sword.'

'Bad luck,' grunted Pike. 'Bad luck.'

West stared down. Bad luck indeed. He could just see, snapped off at the edge of Kaspas's beard, under his jaw, the broken shaft of an arrow, but there was surprisingly little blood. Few marks of any kind. A splatter of mud down one sleeve of his uniform, and that was all. Despite the fact they were, in essence, staring cross-eyed at nothing, West could not help the feeling that

Kaspa's eyes were looking directly into his. There was a peevish twist to his lip, an accusatory wrinkling of his brows. West almost wanted to take him up on it, demand to know what he meant by it, then had to remind himself that the man was dead.

'A letter, then,' muttered West, his fingers fussing with each other, 'to his family.'

Brint gave a miserable sniff which West found, for some reason, utterly infuriating. 'Yes, a letter.'

'Yes. Sergeant Pike, with me.' West could not stand there a moment longer. He turned away from his friends, one living and one dead, and strode off up the valley. He did his very best not to dwell on the fact that, had he not ordered the charge, one of the most pleasant and inoffensive men of his acquaintance would still be alive. One cannot be a leader without a certain ruthlessness, perhaps. But ruthlessness is not always easy.

He and Pike floundered over a crushed earth rampart and a trampled ditch, the valley growing steadily narrower, the high cliffs of stone pressing in on either side. More corpses here. Northmen, and wild men such as they found in Dunbrec, and Shanka too, all peppered liberally across the broken ground. West could see the wall of the fortress now, little more than a mossy hump in the landscape with more death scattered round its foot.

'They held out in there, for seven days?' muttered Pike.

'So it would seem.'

The one entrance was a rough archway in the centre of the wall, its gates torn off and lying ruined. There seemed to be three strange shapes within it. As he got closer, West realised with some discomfort what they were. Three men, hanging dead by their necks from ropes over the top of the wall, their limp boots swinging gently at about chest height. There were a lot of grim Northmen gathered around that gate, looking up at those dangling corpses with some satisfaction. One in particular turned a cruel grin on West and Pike as they came close.

'Well, well, well, if it ain't my old friend Furious,' said Black Dow. 'Turned up late to the party, eh? You always was a slow mover, lad.'

'There were some difficulties. Marshal Burr is dead.'

'Back to the mud, eh? Well, he's in good company, at least. Plenty of good men done that these past days. Who's your chief, now?'

West took a long breath. 'I am.'

Dow laughed, and West watched him laugh, feeling the slightest bit sick. 'Big chief Furious, what do you know?' and he stood up straight and made a mockery of a Union salute while the bodies turned slowly this way and that behind him. 'You should meet my friends. They're all big men too. This here is Crendel Goring, fought for Bethod from way back.' And he reached up and gave one of the bodies a shove, watched it sway back and forth.

'This here is Whitesides, and you couldn't have found a better man anywhere for killing folk and stealing their land.' And he gave the next a push and set it spinning round and round one way, then back the other, limbs all limp and floppy.

'And this one here is Littlebone. As hard a bastard as I've ever hung.' This last man was hacked near to meat, his gold-chased armour battered and

dented, a great wound across his chest and his hanging grey hair thick with blood. One leg was off below his knee, and a pool of dry blood stained the ground underneath him.

‘What happened to him?’ asked West.

‘To Littlebone?’ The great fat hillman, Crummock-i-Phail, was one of the crowd. ‘He got cut down in the battle, fighting to the last man, over yonder.’

‘That he did,’ said Dow, and he gave West a grin even bigger than usual. ‘But that’s no kind of a reason not to hang him now, I reckon.’

Crummock laughed. ‘No kind of a reason!’ And he smiled at the three bodies turning round and round, the ropes creaking. ‘They make a pretty picture, don’t they, hanging there? They say you can see all the beauty in the world in the way a hanged man swings.’

‘Who does?’ asked West.

Crummock shrugged his great shoulders. ‘Them.’

‘Them, eh?’ West swallowed his nausea and pushed his way between the hanging bodies into the fortress. ‘They surely are a bloodthirsty crowd.’

Dogman took another pull at the flask. He was getting good and drunk now. ‘Alright. Let’s get it done then.’

He winced as Grim stuck the needle in, curled his lips back and hissed through his teeth. A nice pricking and niggling to add to the dull throb. The needle went through the skin and dragged the thread after, and Dogman’s arm started burning worse and worse. He took another swig, rocking back and forward, but it didn’t help.

‘Shit,’ he hissed. ‘Shit, shit!’

Grim looked up at him. ‘Don’t watch, then.’

Dogman turned his head. The Union uniform jumped out at him straight away. Red cloth in the midst of all that brown dirt. ‘Furious!’ shouted the Dogman, feeling a grin on his face even through the pain. ‘Glad you could make it! Real glad!’

‘Better to come late than not to come at all.’

‘You’ll get no trace of an argument from me. That is a fact.’

West frowned down at Grim sewing his arm up. ‘You alright?’

‘Well, you know. Tul’s dead.’

‘Dead?’ West stared at him. ‘How?’

‘It’s a battle, ain’t it? Dead men are the point o’ the fucking exercise.’ He waved the flask around. ‘I’ve been sat here, thinking about what I could’ve done differently. Stopped him going down them steps, or gone down with him to watch his back, or made the sky fall in, or all kind o’ stupid notions, none of ’em any help to the dead nor the living. Seems I can’t stop thinking, though.’

West frowned down at the rutted earth. ‘Might be’s a game with no winners.’

‘Ah, fuck!’ Dogman snarled as the needle jabbed into his arm again, and he flung the empty flask bouncing away. ‘The whole fucking business has no winners, though, does it! Shit on it all, I say.’

Grim pulled his knife out and cut the thread. 'Move your fingers.' It burned all the way up Dogman's arm to make a fist, but he forced the fingers closed, growling at the pain as they bunched up tight.

'Looks alright,' said Grim. 'You're lucky.'

The Dogman stared round miserably at the carnage. 'So this is what luck looks like, is it? I've often wondered.' Grim shrugged his shoulders, ripped a piece of cloth for a bandage.

'Do you have Bethod?'

Dogman looked up at West, his mouth open. 'Don't you?'

'A lot of prisoners, but he wasn't among them.'

Dogman turned his head and spat his disgust out into the mud. 'Nor his witch, nor his Feared, nor neither one of his swollen up sons, I'll be bound.'

'I imagine they'll be riding for Carleon as swiftly as possible.'

'More'n likely.'

'I imagine he'll try to raise new forces, to find new allies, to prepare for a siege.'

'I shouldn't wonder.'

'We should follow him as soon as the prisoners are secure.'

Dogman felt a sudden wave of hopelessness, enough almost to knock him over. 'By the dead. Bethod got away.' He laughed, and felt tears prickling his eyes the next moment. 'Will there ever be an end to it?'

Grim finished wrapping the bandage and tied it up tight. 'You're done.'

Dogman stared back at him. 'Done? I'm starting to think I won't ever be done.' He held his hand out. 'Help me up, eh, Furious? I got a friend to bury.'

The sun was getting low when they put Tul in the ground, just peering over the tops of the mountains and touching the edges of the clouds with gold. Good weather, to bury a good man. They stood round the grave, all packed in tight. There were plenty of others being buried, the sad words for them wept and whispered all around, but Tul had been well-loved, no man more, so there was quite the crowd. Even so, all round Logen there was a gap. An empty space a man wide. That space he used to have around him in the old days, where no one would dare to stand. Logen hardly blamed them. He'd have run away himself, if he could.

'Who wants to speak?' asked the Dogman, looking at them, one by one. Logen stared down at his feet, not even able to meet his eye, let alone say a word. He wasn't sure what had happened, in the battle, but he could guess. He could guess well enough, from the bits he did remember. He glanced around, licking at his split lips, but if anyone else guessed, they kept it to themselves.

'No one going to say a word?' asked Dogman again, his voice cracking.

'Guess it best be fucking me, then, eh?' And Black Dow stepped forward. He took a long look round at the gathering. Took a long look at Logen in particular, it seemed to him, but that was most likely just his own worries playing tricks.

'Tul Duru Thunderhead,' said Dow. 'Back to the mud. The dead know, we didn't always see things the same way, me and him. Didn't often agree on

nothing, but maybe that was my fault, as I'm a contrary bastard at the best o' times. I regret it now, I reckon. Now it's too late.' He took a ragged breath.

'Tul Duru. Every man in the North knew his name, and every man said it with respect, even his enemies. He was the sort o' man . . . that gave you hope, I reckon. That gave you hope. You want strength, do you? You want courage? You want things done right and proper, the old way?' He nodded down at the new-turned earth. 'There you go. Tul Duru Thunderhead. Look no fucking further. I'm less, now that he's gone, and so are all o' you.' And Dow turned and stalked off away from the grave and into the dusk, his head down.

'We're all less,' muttered Dogman, staring down at the earth with the glimmer of a tear in his eye. 'Good words.' They all looked broken up, every one of them stood around the grave. West, and his man Pike, and Shivers, and even Grim. All broken up.

Logen wanted to feel as they did. He wanted to weep. For the death of a good man. For the fact that he might've been the one to cause it. But the tears wouldn't come. He frowned down at the fresh-turned earth, as the sun sank behind the mountains, and the fortress in the High Places grew dark, and he felt less than nothing.

If you want to be a new man you have to stay in new places, and do new things, with people who never knew you before. If you go back to the same old ways, what else can you be but the same old person? You have to be realistic. He'd played at being a different man, but it had all been lies. The hardest kind to see through. The kind you tell yourself. He was the Bloody-Nine. That was the fact, and however he twisted, and squirmed, and wished to be someone else, there was no escaping it. Logen wanted to care.

But the Bloody-Nine cares for nothing.

Rude Awakenings

Jeza! was smiling when he began to wake. They were done with this madcap mission, and soon he would be back in Adua. Back in Ardee's arms. Warm and safe. He snuggled down into his blankets at the thought. Then he frowned. There was a knocking sound coming from somewhere. He opened his eyes a crack. Someone hissed at him from across the room, and he turned his head.

He saw Terez' face, pale in the darkness, glaring from between the bed curtains, and the last few weeks came back in a horrible rush. She looked just as she had the day he married her, surely, and yet the perfect face of his queen seemed now ugly and hateful to him.

The royal bedchamber had become a battlefield. The border, watched with iron determination, was an invisible line between door and fireplace which Jeza! crossed at his peril. The far side of the room was Styrian territory, and the mighty bed itself was Terez' strongest citadel, its defences apparently impregnable. On the second night of their marriage, hoping perhaps that there had been some misunderstanding on the first, he had mounted a half-hearted assault which had left him with a bloody nose. Since then he had settled in hopelessly for a long and fruitless siege.

Terez was the very mistress of deception. He would sleep on the floor, or on some item of furniture never quite long enough, or wherever he pleased as long as it was not with her. Then at breakfast she would smile at him, and speak of nothing, sometimes even place her hand fondly on his when she knew they were being watched. Occasionally she would even have him believing that all was now well, but as soon as they were alone she would turn her back on him, and bludgeon him with silence, and stab him with looks of such epic scorn and disgust that he wanted to be sick.

Her ladies-in-waiting behaved towards him with scarcely less contempt whenever he had the misfortune to find himself in their whispering presence. One in particular, the Countess Shalere, apparently his wife's closest friend since a tender age, eyed him always with a murderous hatred. On one occasion he had blundered into the salon where all dozen of them were sitting arranged around Terez, muttering in Styrian. He had felt like a peasant boy stumbling upon a coven of extremely well-presented witches, chanting some dark curse. Probably one directed towards himself. He was made to feel like the lowest, most repulsive animal alive. And he was a king, in his own palace.

For some reason he lived in inexplicable horror that somebody would realise the truth, but if any of the servants noticed they kept it to themselves. He wondered if he should have told someone, but who? And what? Lord Chamberlain, good day. My wife refuses to fuck me. Your Eminence, well met. My wife will not look at me. High Justice, how are you? The Queen despises me, by the way. Most of all, he feared telling Bayaz. He had warned the Magus away from his personal affairs in no uncertain terms, and could scarcely go

crawling for his help now.

And so he went along with the fiction, miserable and confused, and with every day that he pretended at marital bliss it became more and more impossible to see his way clear of it. His whole life stretched away before him – loveless, friendless, and sleeping on the floor.

‘Well?’ hissed Terez.

‘Well what?’ he snarled back.

‘The door!’

As if on cue there was a brutal banging at the door, making it rattle in its frame. ‘Nothing good ever comes from Talins,’ Jezal whispered under his breath, as he flung back his blankets and struggled up from the carpet, stumbled angrily across the room and turned the key in the lock.

Gorst stood in the hallway outside, clad in full armour and with his sword drawn, a lantern held up in one hand, harsh light across one side of his heavy, worried face. From somewhere down the hall came the sound of echoing footsteps, of confused shouting, the flickering of distant lamps. Jezal frowned, suddenly wide awake. He did not like the feel of this.

‘Your Majesty,’ said Gorst.

‘What the hell is going on?’

‘The Gurkish have invaded Midderland.’

Ferro’s eyes snapped open. She sprang up from the settle, her feet planted wide in a fighting stance, the torn-off table leg gripped tight in her fist. She cursed under her breath. She had fallen asleep, and nothing good ever happened when she did that. But there was no one in the room.

All dark and silent.

No sign of the cripple, or his black-masked servants. No sign of the armoured guards who watched her through narrowed eyes whenever she took a step down the tiled halls of this cursed place. Only the slightest chink of light under the panelled door that led through to Bayaz’ room. That and a quiet murmuring of voices. She frowned, and padded over, kneeling silently beside the keyhole.

‘Where have they landed?’ Bayaz’ voice, muffled through the wood.

‘Their first boats came ashore in the grey dusk, on the empty beaches at the southwestern tip of Midderland, near to Keln.’ Yulwei. Ferro felt a tingling thrill, her breath coming fast and cold in her nostrils. ‘Are you prepared?’

Bayaz snorted. ‘We could scarcely be less so. I was not expecting Khalul to move so soon, or so suddenly. They landed in the night, eh? Unannounced. Did Lord Brock not see them come?’

‘My guess is that he saw them all too well, and welcomed them by previous arrangement. No doubt he has been promised the throne of the Union, once the Gurkish have crushed all resistance and hung your bastard from the gates of the Agriont. He will be king – subject to the might of Uthman-ul-Dosht, of course.’

‘Treachery.’

‘Of an unremarkable kind. It should hardly shock such as we, eh, brother?’

We have seen worse, I think, and done worse too, perhaps.'

'Some things must be done.'

She heard Yulwei sigh. 'I never denied it.'

'How many Gurkish?'

'They never come in ones and twos. Five legions, perhaps, so far, but they are only the vanguard. Many more are coming. Thousands. The whole South moves to war.'

'Is Khalul with them?'

'Why would he be? He stays in Sarkant, in his sunny gardens upon the mountain terraces, and waits for news of your destruction. Mamun leads them. Fruit of the desert, thrice blessed and thrice—'

'I know the names he calls himself, the arrogant worm!'

'Whatever he calls himself, he is grown strong, and the Hundred Words are with him. They are here for you, brother. They are come. If I walked in your footsteps I would be away. Away to the cold North, while there is still time.'

'And then what? Will they not follow me? Should I flee to the edge of the World? I was there, not long ago, and it holds little appeal. I have yet a few cards left to play.'

A long pause. 'You found the Seed?'

'No.'

Another pause. 'I am not sorry. To tinker with those forces . . . to bend the First Law, if not to break it. The last time that thing was used it made a ruin of Aulus and came near to making a ruin of the whole world. It is better left buried.'

'Even if our hopes are buried with it?'

'There are greater things at risk than my hopes, or yours.'

Ferro did not care a shit for Bayaz' hopes, or Yulwei's either if it came to that. They had both deceived her. She had swallowed a bellyful of their lies, and their secrets, and their promises. She had done nothing but talk, and wait, and talk again for far too long. She stood up, and lifted her leg, and gave a fighting scream. Her heel caught the lock and tore it from the frame, sent the door shuddering open. The two old men sat at a table nearby, a single lamp throwing light over the dark face, and the pale. A third figure sat in the shadows of the far corner. Quai, silent and sunk in darkness.

'Could you not have knocked?' asked Bayaz.

Yulwei's smile was a bright curve in his dark skin. 'Ferro! It is good to see you still—'

'When are the Gurkish coming?'

His grin faded, and he gave a long sigh. 'I see that you have not learned patience.'

'I learnt it, then ran out of it. When are they coming?'

'Soon. Their scouts are already moving through the countryside of Midderland, taking the villages and laying the fortresses under siege, making the country safe for the rest who will come behind.'

'Someone should stop them,' muttered Ferro, her nails digging into her palms.

Bayaz sat back in his chair, the shadows collecting in his craggy face. 'You speak my very thoughts. Your luck has changed, eh, Ferro? I promised you

vengeance, and now it drops ripe and bloody into your lap. Uthman's army has landed. Thousands of Gurkish, and ready for war. They might be at the city gates within two weeks.'

'Two weeks,' whispered Ferro.

'But I have no doubt some Union soldiers will be going out to greet them sooner. I could find you a place with them, if you cannot wait.'

She had waited long enough. Thousands of Gurkish, and ready for war. The smile tugged at one corner of Ferro's mouth, then grew, and grew, until her cheeks were aching.

PART II

‘Last Argument of Kings’

Inscribed on his cannons by Louis XIV

The Number of the Dead

It was quiet in the village. The few houses, built from old stone with roofs of mossy slate, seemed deserted. The only life in the fields beyond, mostly fresh-harvested and ploughed over, were a handful of miserable crows. Next to Ferro the bell in the tower creaked softly. Some loose shutters on a window swung and tapped. A few curled-up leaves fell on a gust of wind and fluttered gently to the empty square. On the horizon three columns of dark smoke rose up just as gently into the heavy sky.

The Gurkish were coming, and they always had loved to burn.

‘Maljinn!’ Major Vallimir was below, framed by the trapdoor, and Ferro scowled down. He reminded her of Jezal dan Luthar when she had first met him. A plump, pale face stuffed with that infuriating mixture of panic and arrogance. It was plain enough that he had never set an ambush for a goat before, let alone for Gurkish scouts. But still he pretended he knew best. ‘Do you see anything?’ he hissed at her, for the fifth time in an hour.

‘I see them coming,’ Ferro growled back.

‘How many?’

‘Still a dozen.’

‘How far off?’

‘Perhaps quarter of an hour’s ride, now, and your asking will not make them come quicker.’

‘When they are in the square, I will give the signal with two claps.’

‘Make sure you do not miss one hand with the other, pink.’

‘I told you not to call me that!’ A brief pause. ‘We must take one of them alive, to question.’

Ferro wrinkled her nose. Her taste did not lean towards taking Gurkish alive. ‘We will see.’

She turned back to the horizon, and soon enough she heard the sound of Vallimir whispering orders to some of his men. The rest were scattered around the other buildings, hiding. An odd crowd of left-over soldiers. A few were veterans, but most of them were even younger and more twitchy than Vallimir himself. Ferro wished, and not for the first time, that they had Ninefingers with them. Like him or not, no one could have denied that the man knew his business. With him, Ferro had known what she would get. Solid experience or, on occasion, murderous fury. Either one would have been useful.

But Ninefingers was not there.

So Ferro stood in the wide window of the bell tower, alone, frowning out across the rolling fields of Midderland, and watched the riders come closer. A dozen Gurkish scouts, trotting in a loose group down a track. Wriggling specks on a pale streak between patchworks of dark earth.

They slowed as they passed the first wood-built barn, spreading out. A great Gurkish host would number soldiers from all across the Empire, fighters from

a score of different conquered provinces. These twelve scouts were Kadiris, by their long faces and narrow eyes, their saddle-bags of patterned cloth, lightly armed with bows and spears. Killing them would not be much vengeance, but it would be some. It would fill the space for now. A space that had been empty far too long.

One of them startled as a crow flapped up from a scraggy tree. Ferro held her breath, sure that Vallimir or one of his blundering pinks would choose that moment to trip over one another. But there was only silence as the horsemen eased carefully into the village square, their leader with one hand raised for caution. He looked right up at her, but saw nothing. Arrogant fools. They saw only what they wanted to see. A village from which everyone had fled, crushed with fear of the Emperor's matchless army. Her fist clenched tight around her bow. They would learn.

She would teach them.

The leader had a square of floppy paper out in his hands, peering at it as though it was a message in a language he did not understand. A map, maybe. One of his men reined his horse in and slid from the saddle, took its bridle and led it towards a mossy trough. Two more sat loose on their mounts, talking and grinning, moving their hands, telling jokes. A fourth cleaned his fingernails with a knife. Another rode slowly round the edge of the square, leaning from his saddle and peering in through the windows of the houses. Looking for something to steal. One of the joke-tellers burst into a deep peal of laughter.

Then two sharp claps echoed from the buildings.

The scout by the trough was just filling his flask when Ferro's shaft sank into his chest. The canteen tumbled from his hand, shining drops spilling from the neck. Flatbows rattled in the windows. Scouts yelled and stared. One horse stumbled sideways and fell, puffs of dust rising from its flailing hooves, crushing its rider screaming underneath it.

Union soldiers charged from the buildings, shouting, spears ready. One of the riders had his sword half-drawn when he was nailed with a flatbow bolt, fell lolling from the saddle. Ferro's second arrow took another in the back. The one who had been picking his fingernails was dumped from his horse, stumbled up in time to see a Union soldier coming at him with a spear. He threw down his knife and held his arms up too late, was run through anyway, the spear point sticking bloody out of his back as he fell.

Two of them made a dash the way they had come. Ferro took aim at one, but as they reached the narrow lane a rope was pulled tight across the gap. The pair of them were snatched from their saddles, dragging a Union soldier yelping from a building, bouncing along a few strides on his face, rope stuck tight round his arm. One of Ferro's arrows caught a scout between his shoulder-blades as he tried to push himself up from the dust. The other dragged himself a groggy few strides before a Union soldier hit him in the head with a sword and left the back of his skull hanging off.

Of the dozen, only the leader got away from the village. He spurred his horse for a narrow fence between two buildings, jumping it with hooves clattering against the top rail. He galloped off across the coarse stubble of a harvested field, pressed low into his saddle, jerking his heels into his horse's

flanks.

Ferro took a long, slow aim, feeling the smile tugging at the corners of her face. All in a moment she judged the way he was sitting the saddle, the speed of the horse, the height of the tower, felt the wind on her face, the weight of the shaft, the tension in the wood, the string biting into her lip. She watched the arrow fly, a spinning black splinter against the grey sky, and the horse rushed forwards to meet it.

Sometimes, God is generous.

The leader arched his back and tumbled from the saddle, rolling over and over on the dusty earth, specks of mud and cut stalks flying up around him. His cry of agony came to Ferro's ear a moment later. Her lips curled back further from her teeth.

'Hah!' She threw the bow over her shoulder, slid down the ladder, vaulted through the back window and dashed out across the field. Her boots thudded in the soft soil between the clumps of stubble, her hand tightened around the grip of her sword.

The man mewed in the dirt as he tried to drag himself towards his horse. He got one desperate finger hooked over the stirrup as he heard Ferro's quick footsteps behind, but fell back with a squeal when he tried to lift himself. He lay on his side as she ran up, the blade hissing angry from its wooden sheath. His eyes rolled towards her, wild with pain and fear.

A dark face, like her own.

An unexceptional face of forty years old, with a patchy beard and a pale birth-mark on one cheek, dust caked to the other, beads of shining sweat across his forehead. She stood over him, and sunlight glinted on the edge of the curved sword.

'Give me a reason not to do it,' she found she had said. Strange, that she had said it, and to a soldier in the Emperor's army, of all people. In the heat and dust of the Badlands of Kanta she had not been in the habit of offering chances. Perhaps something had changed in her, out there in the wet and ruined west of the world.

He stared up for a moment, his lip trembling. 'I . . .' he croaked, 'my daughters! I have two daughters. I pray to see them married . . .'

Ferro frowned. She should not have let him start talking. A father, with daughters. Just as she had once had a father, been a daughter. This man had done her no harm. He was no more Gurkish than she was. He had not chosen to fight, most likely, or had any choice but to do as the mighty Uthman-ul-Dosht commanded.

'I will go . . . I swear to God . . . I will go back to my wife and my daughters . . .'

The arrow had taken him just under the shoulder and gone clean through, snapped off when he hit the ground. She could see the splintered shaft under his arm. It had missed his lung, by the way he was talking. It would not kill him. Not right away, at least. Ferro could help him onto his horse and he would be gone, with a chance to live.

The scout held up a trembling hand, a spatter of blood on his long thumb. 'Please . . . this is not my war I—'

The sword carved a deep wound out of his face, through his mouth, splitting

his lower jaw apart. He made a hissing moan. The next blow cut his head half off. He rolled over, dark blood pouring out into the dark earth, clutching at the stubble of the shorn crop. The sword broke the back of his skull open and he was still.

It seemed that Ferro was not in a merciful mood that day.

The butchered scout's horse stared dumbly at her. 'What?' she snapped. Perhaps she had changed, out there in the west, but no one changes that much. One less soldier in Uthman's army was a good thing, wherever he came from. She had no need to make excuses for herself. Especially not to a horse. She grabbed at its bridle and gave it a yank.

Vallimir might have been a pink fool, but Ferro had to admit that he had managed the ambush well. Ten scouts lay dead in the village square, their torn clothes flapping in the breeze, their blood smeared across the dusty ground. The only Union casualty was the idiot who had been jerked over by his own rope, covered in dust and scratches.

A good day's work, so far.

A soldier poked at one of the corpses with his boot. 'So this is what the Gurmish look like, eh? Not so fearsome now.'

'These are not Gurmish,' said Ferro. 'Kadiri scouts, pressed into service. They did not want to be here any more than you wanted them here.' The man stared back at her, puzzled and annoyed. 'Kanta is full of people. Not everyone with a brown face is Gurmish, or prays to their God, or bows to their Emperor.'

'Most do.'

'Most have no choice.'

'They're still the enemy,' he sneered.

'I did not say we should spare them.' She shouldered past, back through the door into the building with the bell tower. It seemed Vallimir had managed to take a prisoner after all. He and some others were clustered nervously around one of the scouts, on his knees with his arms bound tightly behind him. He had a bloody graze down one side of his face, staring up with that look that prisoners tend to have.

Scared.

'Where . . . is . . . your . . . main . . . body?' Vallimir was demanding.

'He does not speak your tongue, pink,' snapped Ferro, 'and shouting it will not help.'

Vallimir looked angrily round at her. 'Perhaps we should have brought someone with us who speaks Kantic,' he said with heavy irony.

'Perhaps.'

There was a long pause, while Vallimir waited for her to say more, but she said nothing. Eventually, he gave a long sigh. 'Do you speak Kantic?'

'Of course.'

'Then would you be so kind as to ask him some questions for us?'

Ferro sucked her teeth. A waste of her time, but if it had to be done, it was best done quickly. 'What shall I ask him?'

'Well . . . how far away the Gurmish army is, how many are in it, what route they are taking, you know—'

'Huh.' Ferro squatted down in front of the prisoner and looked him squarely in the eyes. He stared back, helpless and frightened, no doubt wondering what

she was doing with these pinks. She wondered herself.

‘Who are you?’ he whispered.

She drew her knife and held it up. ‘You will answer my questions, or I will kill you with this knife. That is who I am. Where is the Gurmish army?’

He licked his lips. ‘Perhaps . . . two days march away, to the south.’

‘How many?’

‘More than I could count. Many thousands. People of the deserts, and the plains, and the—’

‘What route are they taking?’

‘I do not know. We were only told to ride to this village, and see whether it was empty.’ He swallowed, the lump on the front of his sweaty throat bobbing up and down. ‘Perhaps my Captain knows more—’

‘Ssss,’ hissed Ferro. His Captain would be telling nobody anything now she had carved up his head. ‘A lot of them,’ she snapped at Vallimir, in common, ‘and many more to come, two days’ march behind. He does not know their route. What now?’

Vallimir rubbed at the light stubble on his jaw. ‘I suppose . . . we should take him back to the Agriont. Deliver him to the Inquisition.’

‘He knows nothing. He will only slow us down. We should kill him.’

‘He surrendered! To kill him would be no better than murder, war or no war.’ Vallimir beckoned to one of the soldiers. ‘I won’t have that on my conscience.’

‘I will.’ Ferro’s knife slid smoothly into the scout’s heart, and out. His mouth and his eyes opened up very wide. Blood bubbled through the split cloth on his chest, spread out quickly in a dark ring. He gawped at it, making a long sucking sound.

‘Glugh . . .’ His head dropped back, his body sagged. She turned to see the soldiers staring at her, pale faces puffed up with shock. A busy day for them, maybe. A lot to learn, but they would soon get used to it.

That, or the Gurmish would kill them.

‘They want to burn your farms, and your towns, and your cities. They want to make slaves of your children. They want everyone in the world to pray to God in the same way they do, with the same words they use, and for your land to be a province of their Empire. I know this.’ Ferro wiped the blade of her knife on the sleeve of the dead man’s tunic. ‘The only difference between war and murder is the number of the dead.’

Vallimir stared down at the corpse of his prisoner for a moment, his lips thoughtfully pursed. Ferro wondered if he had more backbone than she had given him credit for. Finally, he turned towards her. ‘What do you suggest?’

‘We could wait for more here. Perhaps even get some real Gurmish this time. But that might mean too many for we few.’

‘So?’

‘East, or north, and set another trap like this one.’

‘And defeat the Emperor’s army a dozen men at a time? Small steps.’

Ferro shrugged. ‘Small steps in the right direction. Unless you’ve seen enough, and want to go back to your walls.’

Vallimir gave her a long frown, then he turned to one of his men, a heavy-built veteran with a scar on his cheek. ‘There is a village just east of here, is

there not, Sergeant Forest?’

‘Yes, sir. Marlhof is no more than ten miles distant.’

‘Will that suit you?’ asked Vallimir, raising one eyebrow at Ferro.

‘Dead Gurkish suit me. That is all.’

Leaves on the Water

‘Carleon,’ said Logen. ‘Aye,’ said Dogman. It squatted there, in the fork of the river, under the brooding clouds. Hard shapes of tall walls and towers on the sheer bluff above the fast-flowing water, up where Skarling’s hall used to stand. Slate roofs and stone buildings squashed in tight on the long downward slope, clustered in round the foot of the hill and with another wall outside, everything leant a cold, sharp shine from the rain just finished falling. Dogman couldn’t say he was glad to see the place again. Every visit yet had turned out badly.

‘It’s changed some, since the battle, all them years ago.’ Logen was looking down at his spread-out hand, waggling the stump of his missing finger.

‘There weren’t no walls like that round it then.’

‘No. But there weren’t no Union army round it neither.’

Dogman couldn’t deny it was a comforting fact. The Union pickets worked their way through the empty fields about the city, a wobbly line of earthworks, and stakes, and fences, with men moving behind ’em, dull sunlight catching metal now and then. Thousands of men, well-armed and vengeful, keeping Bethod penned up.

‘You sure he’s in there?’

‘Don’t see where else he’s got to go. He lost most of his best boys up in the mountains. No friends left, I reckon.’

‘We’ve all got less than we used to,’ Dogman muttered. ‘I guess we just sit here. We got time, after all. Lots of it. We sit here and watch the grass grow, and we wait for Bethod to give up.’

‘Aye.’ But Logen didn’t look like he believed it.

‘Aye,’ said Dogman. But just giving up didn’t sound much like the Bethod he knew.

He turned his head at the sound of hooves fast on the road, saw one of those messengers with a helmet like an angry chicken race from the trees and towards West’s tent, horse well-lathered from hard riding. He reined up in a fumbling hurry, near fell out of his saddle in his rush to get down, wobbled past a few staring officers and in through the flap. Dogman felt that familiar weight of worry in his gut. ‘That’s got the taste o’ bad news.’

‘What other kind is there?’

There was some flutter down there now, soldiers shouting, throwing their arms around. ‘Best go and see what’s happened,’ muttered Dogman, though he’d much rather have walked the other way. Crummock was stood near the tent, frowning at the commotion.

‘Something’s up,’ said the hillman. ‘But I don’t understand a thing these Southerners say or do. I swear, they’re all mad.’

Mad chatter came surging out of that tent alright, when Dogman pushed back the flap. There were Union officers all around the place and in a bastard

of a muddle. West was in the midst of it, face pale as fresh milk, his fists clenched tight around nothing.

‘Furious!’ Dogman grabbed him by the arm. ‘What the hell’s happening?’

‘The Gurkish have invaded Midderland.’ West pulled his arm free and took to shouting.

‘The who have done what now?’ muttered Crummock.

‘The Gurkish.’ Logen was frowning deep. ‘Brown folk, from way down south. Hard folk, by all accounts.’

Pike had come up now, his burned face grim. ‘They landed an army by sea. They might have reached Adua already.’

‘Hold on, now.’ Dogman didn’t know a thing about Gurkish, or Adua, or Midderland, but his bad feeling was getting worse every moment. ‘What’re you telling us, exactly?’

‘We’ve been ordered home. Now.’

Dogman stared. He should’ve known all along it couldn’t be this simple. He grabbed West by the arm again, stabbing down towards Carleon with his dirty finger. ‘We’ve nothing like the men we need to carry on a siege o’ this place without you!’

‘I know,’ said West, ‘and I’m sorry. But there’s nothing I can do. Get over to General Poulder!’ he snapped at a young lad with a squint. ‘Tell him to get his division ready to march for the coast at once!’

Dogman blinked, feeling sick to his stomach. ‘So we fought seven days in the High Places for nothing? Tul died, and the dead know how many more, for nothing?’ It always took him by surprise, how fast something could fall apart once you were leaning on it. ‘That’s it, then. Back to woods, and cold, and running, and killing. No end to it.’

‘Might be another way,’ said Crummock.

‘What way?’

The chief of the hillmen had a sly grin. ‘You know, don’t you Bloody-Nine?’

‘Aye. I know.’ Logen had a look like a man who knows he’s about to hang, and he’s staring at the tree they’re going to do it from. ‘When have you got to leave, Furious?’

West frowned. ‘We have a lot of men and not a lot of road. Poulder’s division tomorrow, I imagine, and Kroy’s the day after.’

Crummock’s grin got a shade wider. ‘So all day tomorrow, there’ll be piles o’ men sat here, dug in round Bethod, looking like they’re never going nowhere, eh?’

‘I suppose there could be.’

‘Give me tomorrow,’ said Logen. ‘Give me just that and maybe I can settle things. Then I’ll come south with you if I’m still alive, and bring who I can. That’s my word. We’ll help you with the Gurkish.’

‘What difference can one day make?’ asked West.

‘Aye,’ muttered Dogman, ‘what’s one day?’ Trouble was, he could already guess the answer.

Water trickled under the old bridge, past the trees and off down the green

hillside. Down towards Carleon. Logen watched a few yellow leaves carried on it, turning round and round, dragged past the mossy stones. He wished that he could just float away, but it didn't seem likely.

'We fought here,' said the Dogman. 'Threetrees and Tul, Dow and Grim, and me. Forley's buried in them woods somewhere.'

'You want to go up there?' asked Logen. 'Give him a visit, see if—'

'What for? I doubt a visit'll do me any good, and I'm damn sure it won't do him any. Nothing will. That's what it is to be dead. You sure about this, Logen?'

'You see another way? The Union won't stick. Might be our last chance to finish with Bethod. Not that much to lose, is there?'

'There's your life.'

Logen took a long breath. 'Can't think of too many people who place much value on that. You coming down?'

Dogman shook his head. 'Reckon I'll stay up here. I had a belly full o' Bethod.'

'Alright then. Alright.' It was as if all the moments of Logen's life, things said and things done, choices he hardly remembered making, had led him to this. Now there was no choice at all. Maybe there never had been. He was like the leaves on the water – carried along, down towards Carleon, and nothing he could do about it. He gave his heels to his horse and off down the slope alone, down the dirt track, beside the gurgling stream.

Everything seemed picked out clearer than usual, as the day wore down. He rode past trees, damp leaves getting ready to fall – golden yellow, burning orange, vivid purple, all the colours of fire. Down towards the valley bottom through the heavy air, just a trace of autumn mist to it, sharp in his throat. The sounds of saddle creaking, harness rattling, hoofbeats in the soft ground all came muffled. He trotted through the empty fields, turned mud pocked with weeds, past the Union pickets, a ditch and a line of sharpened stakes, three times bowshot from the walls. Soldiers there, in studded jackets and steel caps, watched him pass with frowns on their faces.

He pulled on the reins and slowed his horse to a walk. He clattered over a wooden bridge, one of Bethod's new ones, the river underneath surging with the autumn rain. Up the gentle rise, the wall looming over him. High, sheer, dark and solid looking. A threatening piece of wall if ever there'd been one. He couldn't see men at the slots in the battlements, but he guessed they had to be there. He swallowed, spit moving awkward in his throat, then made himself sit up tall, pretending he wasn't cut and aching all over from seven days of battle in the mountains. He wondered if he was about to hear a flatbow click, feel the stab of pain then drop into the mud, dead. Some kind of an embarrassing song that would make.

'Well, well, well!' came a deep voice, and Logen knew it right away. Who else would it be but Bethod?

The strange thing was that he was glad to hear it, for the quickest moment. Until he remembered all the blood between them. Until he remembered they hated each other. You can have enemies you never really meet, Logen had plenty. You can kill men you don't know, he'd done it often. But you can't truly hate a man without loving him first, and there's always a trace of that

love left over.

'I'm taking a look down from my gates and who should ride up out of the past?' Bethod called to him. 'The Bloody-Nine! Would you believe it? I'd organise a feast, but we've no food to spare in here!' He stood there, at the parapet, high up above the doors, fists on the stone. He didn't sneer. He didn't smile. He didn't do much of anything.

'If it ain't the King o' the Northmen!' Logen shouted up. 'Still got your golden hat, then?'

Bethod touched the ring round his head, the big jewel on his brow glittering with the setting sun. 'Why wouldn't I have?'

'Let me see . . .' Logen looked left and right, up and down the bare walls. 'Just that you've got shit all left to be King of, far as I can tell.'

'Huh. I reckon we're both feeling lonely. Where are your friends, Bloody-Nine? Those killers you liked around you. Where's the Thunderhead, and Grim, and the Dogman, and that bastard Black Dow?'

'All done with, Bethod. Dead, up in the mountains. Dead as Skarling. Them and Littlebone, and Goring, and Whitesides, and plenty more besides.'

Bethod looked grim at that. 'Not much to cheer about, if you're asking me. That's some useful men gone back to the mud, one way or another. Some friends of mine, and some of yours. There never is a happy outcome with we two, is there? Bad as friends, and worse as enemies. What did you come here for, Ninefingers?'

Logen sat there, for a moment, thinking of all the other times he'd done what he had to do now. The challenges he'd made, and their outcomes, and there were no happy memories among that lot. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's reluctant. But there was no other way. 'I'm here to make a challenge!' he bellowed, and the sound of it echoed back from the damp, dark walls and died a slow death in the misty air.

Bethod tipped back his head and laughed. A laugh without much joy in it, Logen reckoned. 'By the dead, Ninefingers, but you never change. You're like some old dog no one can stop from barking. Challenge? What have we got left to fight over?'

'I win, you open the gates and belong to me. My prisoner. I lose, the Union pack up and sail for home, and you're free.'

Bethod's smile slowly faded and his eyes narrowed, suspicious. Logen knew that look from way back. Turning over the chances, sorting through the reasons why. 'That sounds like a golden offer, considering the fix I'm in. Hard to believe it. What's in it for your Southern friends up there?'

Logen snorted. 'They'll wait, if they have to, but they don't much care about you, Bethod. You're nothing to them, for all your bluster. They kicked your arse across the North already and they reckon you'll not be bothering them again either way. If I win, they get your head. If I lose, they can go home early.'

'I'm nothing to them, eh?' Bethod split a sad smile. 'Is that what it's come to, after all my work, and sweat, and pain? Are you happy, Ninefingers? To see all I've fought for put in the dust?'

'Why shouldn't I be? You've no one but yourself to blame for it. It was you brought us to this. Take my challenge, Bethod, then maybe one of us can have

peace!

The King of the Northmen gaped down, eyes wide. 'No one else to blame? Me? How soon we all forget!' He grabbed the chain round his shoulders and rattled it. 'You think I wanted this? You think I asked for any of it? All I wanted was a strip more land to feed my people, to stop the big clans squeezing me. All I wanted was to win a few victories to be proud of, to pass on something better to my sons than I got from my father.' He leaned forward, his hands clutching at the battlements. 'Who was it always had to push a step further? Who was it would never let me stop? Who was it had to taste blood, and once he'd tasted it got drunk on it, went mad with it, could never get enough?' His finger stabbed down. 'Who else but the Bloody-Nine?'

'That's not how it was,' growled Logen.

Bethod's laughter echoed harsh on the wind. 'Is it not? I wanted to talk with Shama Heartless, but you had to kill him! I tried to strike a deal at Heonan, but you had to climb up and settle your score, and start a dozen more! Peace, you say? I begged you to let me make peace at Uffrith, but you had to fight Threetrees! On my knees I begged you, but you had to have the biggest name in all the North! Then once you'd beaten him, you broke your word to me and let him live, as though there was nothing bigger to think about than your damn pride!'

'That's not how it was,' said Logen.

'There's not a man in the North that doesn't know the truth of it! Peace? Hah! What about Rattleneck, eh? I would have ransomed his son back to him, and we could all have gone home happy, but no! What did you say to me? Easier to stop the Whiteflow than to stop the Bloody-Nine! Then you had to nail his head to my standard for the whole world to see, so the vengeance would never find an end! Every time I tried to stop, you dragged me on, deeper and deeper into the mire! Until there could be no stopping any longer! Until it was kill or be killed! Until I had to put down the whole North! You made me King, Ninefingers. What other choices did you leave me?'

'That's not how it was,' whispered Logen. But he knew it had been.

'Tell yourself that I'm the cause of all your woes if it makes you happy! Tell yourself I'm the merciless one, the murderous one, the bloodthirsty one, but ask yourself who I learned it from. I had the best master! Play at being the good man if you please, the man with no choices, but we both know what you really are. Peace? You'll never have peace, Bloody-Nine. You're made of death!'

Logen would've liked to deny it, but it would just have been more lies. Bethod truly knew him. Bethod truly understood him. Better than anyone. His worst enemy, and still his best friend. 'Then why not kill me, when you had the chance?'

The King of the Northmen frowned, as though he couldn't understand something. Then he started to laugh again. He shrieked with it. 'You don't know why? You stood right beside him and you don't know? You learned nothing from me, Ninefingers! After all these years, you still let the rain wash you any way it pleases!'

'What're you saying?' snarled Logen.

'Bayaz!'

‘Bayaz? What of him?’

‘I was ready to put the bloody cross in you, sink your carcass in a bog with all the rest of your misfit idiots and was happy to do it, until that old liar came calling!’

‘And?’

‘I owed him, and he wanted you let go. It was that meddling old fuck that saved your worthless hide, and nothing else!’

‘Why?’ growled Logen, not knowing what to make of it, but not liking that he was learning about it so long after everyone else.

But Bethod only chuckled. ‘Maybe I didn’t grovel low enough for his taste. You’re the one he saved, you ask him the whys, if you live long enough. But I don’t think you will. I take your challenge! Here. Tomorrow. At sunrise.’ He rubbed his palms together. ‘Man against man, with the future of the North hanging bloody on the outcome! Just as it used to be, eh, Logen? In the old days? In the sunny valleys of the past? Roll the dice together one more time, shall we?’ The King of the Northmen stepped slowly back, away from the battlements. ‘Some things have changed, though. I’ve a new champion now! If I was you, I’d say your goodbyes tonight, and get ready for the mud! After all . . . what was it you used to tell me . . . ?’ His laughter faded slowly into the dusk. ‘You have to be realistic!’

‘Good piece o’ meat,’ said Grim.

A warm fire and a good piece of meat were two things to be thankful for, and there’d been times enough when Dogman had a lot less, but watching the blood drip from that chunk of mutton was making him feel sick. Reminded him of the blood that came out of Shama Heartless when Logen split him open. Years ago, maybe, but the Dogman could see it fresh as yesterday. He could hear the roars from the men, the shields crashing together. He could smell the sour sweat and the fresh blood on the snow.

‘By the dead,’ grunted Dogman, mouth watering like he was about to puke. ‘How can you think about eating now?’

Dow gave a toothy grin. ‘Us going hungry ain’t going to help Ninefingers any. Nothing is. That’s the point of a duel, ain’t it? All about one man.’ He poked at the meat with his knife and made the blood run sizzling into the fire. Then he sat back, thoughtful. ‘You reckon he can do it? Really? You remember that thing?’ Dogman felt a ghost of the sick fear he’d had in the mist, and he shuddered to his boots. He weren’t likely ever to forget the sight of that giant coming through the murk, the sight of his painted fist rising, the sound of it crunching into Threetrees’ ribs and crushing the life out of him.

‘If anyone can do it,’ he growled through his gritted teeth, ‘I reckon Logen can.’

‘Uh,’ grunted Grim.

‘Aye, but do you think he will? That’s my question. That, and what happens if he don’t?’ It was a question that Dogman could hardly bear to think up an answer to. Logen would be dead, for a first thing. Then there’d be no siege of Carleon anymore. Dogman had too few men left after the mountains to keep a

piss-pot surrounded, let alone the best walled city in the North. Bethod could do as he pleased – seek out help, and find new friends, and set to fighting again. There was no one tougher in a tight corner.

‘Logen can do it,’ he whispered, bunching his fists and feeling the long cut down his arm burning. ‘He has to.’

He nearly fell in the fire when a great fat hand thumped him on the back. ‘By the dead but I never seen such a fire-full o’ long faces!’ Dogman winced. The crazy hillman was hardly what he needed to lift his mood, grinning out of the night with his children behind him, great big weapons over their shoulders.

Crummock was down to just the two now, since one of his sons got killed up in the mountains, but he didn’t seem so upset about it. He’d lost his spear too, snapped off in some Easterner, as he was fond of saying, so he still didn’t have to carry aught himself. Neither one of the children had said much since the battle, or not in the Dogman’s hearing, anyway. No more talk about how many men folk might’ve killed. The seeing of it close up could be a woeful drain on your enthusiasm for the business of war. Dogman knew well enough how that went.

But Crummock himself had no trouble keeping cheerful. ‘Where’s Ninefingers got himself off to?’

‘Gone off on his own. Always liked to do that, before a duel.’

‘Mmm.’ Crummock stroked at the fingerbones round his neck. ‘Speaking to the moon, I’ll be bound.’

‘Shitting himself is closer to it, I reckon.’

‘Well, as long as you get the shitting done before the fight, I don’t reckon anyone could grumble.’ He grinned all across his face. ‘No one’s loved of the moon like the Bloody-Nine, I tell you! No one in all the wide Circle of the World. He’s got some kind of chance at winning a fair fight, and that’s the best a man could hope for against that devil-thing. There’s only one problem.’

‘Just one?’

‘There’ll be no fair fight as long as that damn witch is alive.’

The Dogman felt his shoulders slump even further. ‘How d’you mean?’

Crummock spun one of the wooden signs on his necklace round and around. ‘I can’t see her letting Bethod lose, and herself along with him, can you? A witch as clever as that one? There’s all kinds of magic she could mix. All kinds of blessings and curses. All kinds of ways that bitch could tilt the outcome, as though the chances weren’t tilted enough already.’

‘Eh?’

‘My point is this. Someone needs to stop her.’

Dogman hadn’t thought he could feel any lower. Now he knew better. ‘Good luck with that,’ he muttered.

‘Ha ha, my lad, ha ha. I’d love to do it, too, but they’ve got an awful stretch of walls down there, and I’m not much for climbing over ’em.’ Crummock slapped one fat hand against his fat belly. ‘Twice too much meat for that. No, what we need for this task is a small man, but with great big fruits on him. No doubt we do, and the moon knows it. A man with a talent for creeping about, sharp-eyed and sure-footed. We need someone with a quick hand and a quick mind.’ He looked at the Dogman, and he grinned. ‘Now where is it that we’d

find a man like that, do you reckon?’

‘You know what?’ Dogman put his face in his hands. ‘I’ve no fucking idea.’

Logen lifted the battered flask to his lips and took a mouthful. He felt the sharp liquor tingling on his tongue, tickling at his throat, that old need to swallow. He leaned forward, pursed his lips, and blew it out in a fine spray. A gout of fire went up into the cold night. He peered into the darkness, saw nothing but the black outlines of tree-trunks, the shifting black shadows that his fire cast between them.

He shook the flask back and forth, heard the last measure sloshing inside. He shrugged his shoulders, put it to his mouth and tipped it all the way, felt it burn down to his stomach. The spirits could share with him tonight. Chances were good that, after tomorrow, he wouldn’t be calling on them again.

‘Ninefingers.’ The voice rustled at him like the leaves falling.

One spirit slid out from the shadows, came up into the light from the fire. There was no trace of recognition about it, and Logen found he was relieved. There was no accusation either, no fear and no distrust. It didn’t care what he was, or what he’d done.

Logen tossed the empty flask down beside him. ‘On your own?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, you’re never alone if you bring laughter with you.’ The spirit said nothing. ‘Reckon laughter’s a thing for men, not for spirits.’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t speak much, do you?’

‘I did not call on you.’

‘True.’ Logen stared into the fire. ‘I have to fight a man tomorrow. A man called Fenris the Feared.’

‘He is not a man.’

‘You know of him, then?’

‘He is old.’

‘By your reckoning?’

‘Nothing is old by my reckoning, but he goes back to the Old Time and beyond. He had another master, then.’

‘What master?’

‘Glustrod.’

The name was like a knife in the ear. No name could’ve been less expected, or less welcome. The wind blew cold through the trees, and memories of the towering ruins of Aulcus crowded in on Logen, and made his back shiver. ‘No chance it’s some different Glustrod than the one came close to destroying half the world?’

‘There is no other. He it was that wrote the signs upon the Feared’s skin. Signs in the Old Tongue, the language of devils, across his left side. That flesh is of the world below. Where the word of Glustrod is written, the Feared cannot be harmed.’

‘Cannot be harmed? Not at all?’ Logen thought about it a moment. ‘Why not write on both sides?’

‘Ask Glustrod.’

‘I don’t think that’s likely.’

‘No.’ A long pause. ‘What will you do, Ninefingers?’

Logen peered off sideways into the trees. The notion of setting off running, and never looking back, seemed a pretty one, right then. Sometimes it can be better to live with the fear of it, than to die doing it, whatever Logen’s father had told him.

‘I ran before,’ he muttered, ‘and I only ran a circle. For me, Bethod’s at the end of every path.’

‘Then that is all our talk.’ The spirit stood up from the fire.

‘Perhaps I’ll see you again.’

‘I do not think so. The magic leaks from the world, and my kind sleep. I do not think so. Even if you beat the Feared, and I do not think you will.’

‘Message o’ hope then, eh?’ Logen snorted. ‘Luck go with you.’

The spirit faded back into the darkness, and was gone. It did not wish Logen luck. It did not care.

Authority

It was a dour and depressing meeting, even for the Closed Council. The weather beyond the narrow windows was sullen and overcast, promising storms but never delivering, casting the White Chamber into a chill gloom. From time to time heavy gusts of wind would rattle the old window panes, making Jezal start and shiver in his fur-trimmed robe.

The grim expressions of the dozen old faces did little to warm his bones. Lord Marshal Varuz was all clenched jaw and harsh determination. Lord Chamberlain Hoff clutched his goblet like a drowning man clinging to the last fragment of his boat. High Justice Marovia frowned as though he were about to pronounce the death sentence on the entire gathering, himself among them. Arch Lector Sult's thin lip was permanently curled as his cold eyes slid from Bayaz, to Jezal, to Marovia, and back.

The First of the Magi himself glared down the table. 'The situation, please, Lord Marshal Varuz.'

'The situation, honestly, is grim. Adua is in uproar. Perhaps one third of the population has already fled. The Gurmish blockade means that few supplies are making it to the markets. Curfews are in place but some citizens are still seizing the opportunity to rob, steal and riot while the authorities are occupied elsewhere.'

Marovia shook his head, grey beard swaying gently. 'And we can only expect the situation to deteriorate as the Gurmish come closer to the city.'

'Which they are,' said Varuz, 'at the rate of several miles a day. We are doing all we can to frustrate them, but with our resources so limited . . . they may well be outside the gates within the week.'

There were a few shocked gasps, breathed oaths, nervous sideways glances. 'So soon?' Jezal's voice cracked slightly as he said it.

'I am afraid so, your Majesty.'

'What is the Gurmish strength?' asked Marovia.

'Estimates vary wildly. At present however . . . ' and Varuz sucked worriedly at his teeth, 'it appears they field at least fifty thousand.'

There were further sharp intakes of breath, not least from Jezal's own throat. 'So many?' muttered Halleck.

'And thousands more landing every day near Keln,' put in Admiral Reutzer, doing nothing to lift the mood. 'With the best part of our navy on its way to retrieve the army after its northern adventure, we are powerless to stop them.'

Jezal licked his lips. The walls of the wide room seemed to close in further with every moment. 'What of our troops?'

Varuz and Reutzer exchanged a brief glance. 'We have two regiments of the King's Own, one of foot and one of horse, some six thousand men in all. The Grey Watch, tasked with the defence of the Agriont itself, numbers four thousand. The Knights Herald and of the Body form an elite of some five

hundred. In addition, there are non-combat soldiers – cooks, grooms, smiths, and so forth – who could be armed in an emergency—’

‘I believe this qualifies,’ observed Bayaz.

‘—perhaps some few thousand more. The city watch might be of some use, but they are hardly professional soldiers.’

‘What of the nobles?’ asked Marovia. ‘Where is their aid?’

‘Some few have sent men,’ said Varuz grimly, ‘others only their regrets. Most . . . not even that.’

‘Hedging their bets.’ Hoff shook his head. ‘Brock has let it be known there will be Gurkish gold for those who help him, and Gurkish mercy for those who stand with us.’

‘It has ever been so,’ lamented Torlichorm. ‘The nobles are interested only in their own welfare!’

‘Then we must open the armouries,’ said Bayaz, ‘and we must not be shy with their contents. We must arm every citizen who can hold a weapon. We must arm the labourers’ guilds, and the craftsmens’ guilds, and the veterans’ associations. Even the beggars in the gutters must be ready to fight.’

All well and good, Jezal supposed, but he hardly cared to trust his life to a legion of beggars. ‘When will Lord Marshal West return with the army?’

‘If he received his orders yesterday, it will be a month at the very least before he is disembarked and ready to come to our aid.’

‘Which means we must withstand several weeks of siege,’ muttered Hoff, shaking his head. He leaned close to Jezal’s ear and spoke softly, quite as if they were schoolgirls trading secrets. ‘Your Majesty, it might be prudent for you and your Closed Council to leave the city. To relocate your government further north, outside the path of the Gurkish advance, where the campaign can be conducted in greater safety. To Holsthorm, perhaps, or—’

‘Absolutely not,’ said Bayaz sternly.

Jezal could scarcely deny that the notion held its attractions. The island of Shabulyan at that moment seemed an ideal place to relocate his government to – but Bayaz was right. Harod the Great would hardly have entertained the idea of retreat, and neither, unfortunately, could Jezal.

‘We will fight the Gurkish here,’ he said.

‘Merely a suggestion,’ muttered Hoff, ‘merely prudence.’

Bayaz spoke over him. ‘How do the defences of the city stand?’

‘We have, in essence, three concentric lines of defence. The Agriont itself is, of course, our last bastion.’

‘It will not come to that, though, eh?’ chuckled Hoff, with far from total conviction.

Varuz decided not to answer. ‘Arnault’s Wall is beyond it, enclosing the oldest and most crucial parts of the city – the Agriont, the Middleway, the main docks and the Four Corners among them. Casamir’s Wall is our outermost line of defence – weaker, lower, and a great deal longer than Arnault’s. Smaller walls run between these two, like the spokes of a wheel, dividing the outer ring of the city into five boroughs, each of which can be sealed off, should it be captured by the enemy. There are some built-up areas beyond Casamir’s Wall, but those must be immediately abandoned.’

Bayaz planted his elbows on the edge of the table, his meaty fists clasped

together. 'Given the number and quality of our troops, we would be best served by evacuating the outer quarters of the city and concentrating our efforts around the much shorter and stronger length of Arnault's wall. We can continue to fight a rear-guard action in the outer boroughs, where our superior knowledge of the streets and buildings stands in our favour—'

'No,' said Jezal.

Bayaz fixed him with a brooding stare. 'Your Majesty?'

But Jezal refused to be overawed. It had been becoming clear for some time that if he allowed the Magus to rule him on every issue then he would never escape from under his boot. He might have seen Bayaz make a man explode with a thought, but he was hardly likely to do it to the King of the Union before his own Closed Council. Not with the Gurmish breathing down all their necks.

'I do not intend to give up the greater part of my capital to the Union's oldest enemy without giving battle. We will defend Casimir's Wall, and fight for every stride of ground.'

Varuz glanced across at Hoff, and the Chamberlain raised his eyebrows by the tiniest fraction. 'Er . . . of course, your Majesty. Every stride.' There was an uncomfortable silence, the displeasure of the First of the Magi hanging over the group as heavily as the storm clouds hung over the city.

'Does my Inquisition have anything to contribute?' croaked Jezal, doing his best to mount a diversion.

Sult's eyes darted coldly up to his. 'Of course, your Majesty. The Gurmish love of intrigue is well known. We have no doubt that there are already spies within the walls of Adua. Perhaps within the Agriont itself. All citizens of Kantic origin are now being interned. My Inquisitors are working day and night in the House of Questions. Several spies have already confessed.'

Marovia snorted. 'So we are expected to suppose that the Gurmish love of intrigue does not extend to the hiring of white-skinned agents?'

'We are at war!' hissed Sult, giving the High Justice a deadly glare. 'The very sovereignty of our nation is at risk! This is no time for your blather about freedom, Marovia!'

'On the contrary, this is precisely the time!'

The two old men bickered on, straining everyone's frayed nerves to breaking point. Bayaz, meanwhile, had sunk back into his chair and folded his arms, watching Jezal with an expression of calm consideration which was, if anything, even more fearsome than his frown. Jezal felt the worry weighing ever heavier upon him. However you looked at things, he was teetering on the verge of having the briefest and most disastrous reign in Union history.

'I am sorry that I had to send for your Majesty,' piped Gorst, in his girlish little voice.

'Of course, of course.' The clicking of Jezal's polished boot-heels echoed angrily around them.

'There is only so much that I can do.'

'Of course.'

Jezal shoved open the double doors with both hands. Terez sat bolt upright in the midst of the gilded chamber beyond, glaring at him down her nose in that manner with which he had become so infuriatingly familiar. As though he were an insect in her salad. Several Styrian ladies looked up, and then back to their tasks. Chests and boxes cluttered the room, clothes were being neatly packed within. Every impression was given that the Queen of the Union was planning to leave the capital, and without so much as informing her husband.

Jezal ground his already aching teeth. He was tormented by a disloyal Closed Council, a disloyal Open Council, and a disloyal populace. The poisonous disloyalty of his wife was almost too much to bear. 'What the hell is this?'

'I and my ladies can hardly assist you in your war with the Emperor.' Terez turned her flawless head smoothly away from him. 'We are returning to Talins.'

'Impossible!' hissed Jezal. 'A Gurmish army of many thousands is bearing down upon the city! My people are fleeing Adua in droves and those that remain are a whisker from sliding into outright panic! Your leaving now would send entirely the wrong message! I cannot allow it!'

'Her Majesty is in no way involved!' snapped the Countess Shalere, gliding across the polished floor towards him.

As though Jezal had not enough to worry about with the Queen herself, he was now obliged to bandy words with her companions. 'You forget yourself,' he snarled at her.

'It is you who forgets!' She took a step towards him, her face twisted. 'You forget that you are a bastard son, and a scarred one at—'

The back of Jezal's hand cracked sharply into her sneering mouth and sent her reeling back with an ungainly gurgle. She tripped over her dress and collapsed on the floor, one shoe flying from her flailing foot and off into the corner of the room.

'I am a King, and in my own palace. I refuse to be spoken to in this manner by a glorified lady's maid.' The voice came out, flat, cold, and frighteningly commanding. It scarcely sounded like his own, but who else's could it be? He was the only man in the room. 'I see that I have been far too generous with you, and that you have mistaken my generosity for weakness.' The eleven ladies stared at him, and at their fallen comrade, crumpled on the ground with one hand to her bloody mouth. 'If any of your witches should desire to depart these troubled shores, I will arrange passage for them, and even pull an oar myself with a light heart. But you, your Majesty, will be going nowhere.'

Terez had leaped up from her seat and was glowering at him, body rigid. 'You heartless brute—' she began to hiss.

'We may both wholeheartedly wish it were otherwise!' he roared over her, 'but we are married! The time to raise objections to my parentage, or my person, or to any other facet of our situation, was before you became Queen of the Union! Despise me all you wish, Terez, but you . . . go . . . nowhere.' And Jezal swept the dumbstruck ladies with a baleful glare, turned on his polished heel and stalked from the airy salon.

Damn it but his hand hurt.

The Circle

Dawn was coming, a grey rumour, the faintest touch of brightness around the solemn outline of the walls of Carleon. The stars had all faded into a stony sky, but the moon still hung there, just above the tree-tops, seeming almost close enough to try an arrow at.

West had not closed his eyes all night, and had passed into that strange realm of twitchy, dreamlike wakefulness that comes beyond exhaustion. Some time in the silent darkness, after all the orders had been given, he had sat by the light of a single lamp to write a letter to his sister. To vomit up excuses. To demand forgiveness. He had sat, he could not have said for how long, with the pen over the paper, but the words had simply not come. He had wanted to say all that he felt, but when it came to it, he felt nothing. The warm taverns of Adua, cards in the sunny courtyard. Ardee's one-sided smile. It all seemed a thousand years ago.

The Northmen were already busy, clipping at the grass in the shadow of the walls, the clicking of their shears a strange echo of the gardeners in the Agriont, shaving a circle a dozen strides across down to the roots. The ground, he supposed, on which the duel would take place. The ground where, in no more than an hour or two, the fate of the North would be decided. Very much like a fencing circle, except that it might soon be sprayed with blood.

'A barbaric custom,' muttered Jalenhorm, his thoughts evidently taking a similar course.

'Really?' growled Pike. 'I was just now thinking what a civilised one it is.'

'Civilised? Two men butchering each other before a crowd?'

'Better than a whole crowd butchering each other. A problem solved with only one man killed? That's a war ended well, to my mind.'

Jalenhorm shivered and blew into his cupped hands. 'Still. A lot to hang on two men fighting one another. What if Ninefingers loses?'

'Then I suppose that Bethod will go free,' said West, unhappily.

'But he invaded the Union! He caused the deaths of thousands! He deserves to be punished!'

'People rarely get what they deserve.' West thought of Prince Ladisla's bones rotting out in the wasteland. Some terrible crimes go unpunished, and a few, for no reason beyond the fickle movements of chance, are richly rewarded. He stopped in his tracks.

A man was sitting on his own on the long slope, his back to the city. A man hunched over in a battered coat, so still and quiet in the half-light that West had almost missed him. 'I'll catch you up,' he said as he left the path. The grass, coated with a pale fur of frost, crunched gently under his boots with each step.

'Pull up a chair.' Breath smoked gently round Ninefingers' darkened face.

West squatted down on the cold earth beside him. 'Are you ready?'

'Ten times before I've done this. Can't say I've ever yet been ready. Don't know that there is a way to get ready for a thing like this. The best I've worked out is just to sit, and let the time crawl past, and try not to piss yourself.'

'I imagine a wet crotch could be an embarrassment in the circle.'

'Aye. Better than a split head, though, I reckon.'

Undeniably true. West had heard tales of these Northern duels before, of course. Growing up in Angland, children whispered lurid stories of them to each other. But he had little idea how they were really conducted. 'How does this business work?'

'They mark out a circle. Round the edge men stand with shields, half from one side, half from the other, and they make sure no one leaves before it's settled. Two men go into the circle. The one that dies there is the loser. Unless someone has it in mind to be merciful. Can't see that happening today, though, somehow.'

Also undeniable. 'What do you fight with?'

'Each one of us brings something. Could be anything. Then there's a spin of a shield, and the winner picks the weapon he wants.'

'So you might end up fighting with what your enemy brought?'

'It can happen. I killed Shama Heartless with his own sword, and got stuck through with the spear I brought to fight Harding Grim.' He rubbed at his stomach, as though the memory ached there. 'Still, don't hurt any worse, getting stuck with your own spear instead of someone else's.'

West laid a hand thoughtfully on his own gut. 'No.' They sat in silence for a while longer.

'There's a favour I'd like to ask you.'

'Name it.'

'Would you and your friends hold shields for me?'

'Us?' West blinked towards the Carls in the shadow of the wall. Their great round shields looked hard enough to lift, let alone to use well. 'Are you sure? I've never held one in my life.'

'Maybe, but you know whose side you're on. There ain't many folk among these that I can trust. Most of 'em are still trying to work out who they hate more, me or Bethod. It only takes one to give me a shove when I need a push, or let me fall when I need catching. Then we're all done. Me especially.'

West puffed out his cheeks. 'We'll do what we can.'

'Good. Good.'

The cold silence dragged out. Over the black hills, the black trees, the moon sank and grew dimmer.

'Tell me, Furious. Do you reckon a man has to pay for the things he's done?'

West looked up sharply, the irrational and sickly thought flashing through his mind that Ninefingers was talking of Ardee, or of Ladisla, or both. Certainly, the Northman's eyes seemed to glint with accusation in the half-light – then West felt the surge of fear subside. Ninefingers was talking of himself, of course, as everyone always does, given the chance. It was guilt in his eyes, not accusation. Each man has his own mistakes to follow him.

'Maybe.' West cleared his dry throat. 'Sometimes. I don't know. I suppose we've all done things we regret.'

‘Aye,’ said Ninefingers. ‘I reckon.’

They sat together in silence, and watched the light leak across the sky.

‘Let’s go, chief!’ hissed Dow. ‘Let’s fucking go!’

‘I’ll say when!’ Dogman spat back, holding the dewy branches out of the way and peering towards the walls, a hundred strides off, maybe, across a damp meadow. ‘Too much light, now. We’ll wait for that bloody moon to drop a touch further, then we’ll make a run at it.’

‘It ain’t going to get any darker! Bethod can’t have too many men left after all the ones we killed up in the mountains, and that’s a lot o’ walls. They’ll be spread thin as cobwebs up there.’

‘It only takes one to—’

And Dow was off across that field and running, as plain on the flat grass as a turd on a snow-field.

‘Shit!’ hissed Dogman, helpless.

‘Uh,’ said Grim.

There was nothing to do but stare, and wait for Dow to get stuck full of arrows. Wait for the shouts, and torches lit, and the alarm to go up, and the whole thing dumped right in the shit-hole. Then Dow dashed up the last bit of slope and was gone into the shadows by the wall.

‘He made it,’ said Dogman.

‘Uh,’ said Grim.

That ought to have been a good thing, but Dogman didn’t feel too much like laughing. He had to make the run himself now, and he didn’t have Dow’s luck. He looked at Grim, and Grim shrugged. They burst out from the trees together, feet pounding across the soft meadow. Grim had the longer legs, started pulling away. The ground was a good deal softer than Dogman had—

‘Gah!’ His foot squelched to the ankle and he went flying over, splashed down in the mire and slid along on his face. He floundered up, cold and gasping, ran the rest of the way with his wet shirt plastered against his skin. He stumbled up the slope to the foot of the walls and bent over, hands to his knees, blowing hard and spitting out grass.

‘Looks like you took a tumble there, chief.’ Dow’s grin was a white curve in the shadows.

‘You mad bastard!’ hissed Dogman, his temper flaring up hot in his cold chest. ‘You could’ve been the deaths of all of us!’

‘Oh, there’s still time.’

‘Shhhh.’ Grim flailed one hand at them to say keep quiet. Dogman pressed himself tight to the wall, worry snuffing his anger out quick-time. He heard men moving up above, saw the glimmer of a lamp pass slow down the walls. He waited, still, no sound but Dow’s quiet breath beside him and his own heart pounding, ’til the men above moved on and all was quiet again.

‘Tell me that ain’t got your blood flowing quick, chief,’ whispered Dow.

‘We’re lucky it ain’t flowing right out of us.’

‘What now?’

Dogman gritted his teeth as he tried to scrape the mud out of his face. ‘Now

we wait.'

Logen stood up, brushed the dew from his trousers, took a long breath of the chill air. There could be no denying any longer that the sun was well and truly up. It might've been hidden in the east behind Skarling's Hill, but the tall black towers up there had bright golden edges, the thin, high clouds were pinking underneath, the cold sky between turning pale blue.

'Better to do it,' Logen whispered under his breath, 'than live with the fear of it.' He remembered his father telling him that. Saying it in the smoky hall, light from the fire shifting on his lined face, long finger wagging. Logen remembered telling it to his own son, smiling by the river, teaching him to tickle fish, Father and son, both dead now, earth and ashes. No one would learn it after Logen, once he was gone. No one would miss him much at all, he reckoned. But then who cared? There's nothing worth less than what men think of you after you're back in the mud.

He wrapped his fingers round the grip of the Maker's sword, felt the scored lines tickling at his palm. He slid it from the sheath and let it hang, worked his shoulders round in circles, jerked his head from side to side. One more cold breath in, and out, then he started walking, up through the crowd that had gathered in a wide arc around the gate. A mix of the Dogman's Carls and Crummock's hillmen, and a few Union soldiers given leave to watch the crazy Northerners kill each other. Some called to him as he came through, all knowing there were a lot more lives hanging on this than Logen's own.

'It's Ninefingers!'

'The Bloody-Nine.'

'Put an end to this!'

'Kill that bastard!'

They had their shields, all the men that Logen had picked to hold them, standing in a solemn knot near the walls. West was one, and Pike, and Red Hat, and Shivers too. Logen wondered if he'd made a mistake with the last of them, but he'd saved the man's life in the mountains and that ought to count for something. Ought to was a thin thread to hang your life on, but there it was. His life had been dangling from a thin thread ever since he could remember.

Crummock-i-Phail fell into step beside him, big shield looking small on one big arm, the other hand resting light on his fat belly. 'You looking forward to this then, Bloody-Nine? I am, I can tell you that!'

Hands slapped at his shoulders, voices called encouragement, but Logen said nothing. He didn't look left or right as he pushed past into the shaven circle. He felt men close in behind him, heard them set their shields in a half-ring round the edge of the short grass, facing the gates of Carleon. Further back the crowd pressed in tight. Whispering to each other. Straining to see. No way back now, that was a fact. But then there never had been. He'd been heading here all his days. Logen stopped, in the centre of the circle, and he turned his face up towards the battlements.

'It's sunrise!' he roared. 'Let's get to it!'

There was silence, while the echoes died, and the wind pushed some loose leaves around the grass. A silence long enough for Logen to start hoping no one would answer. To start hoping they'd all somehow slipped away in the night, and there'd be no duel after all.

Then faces appeared on the walls. One here, one there, then a whole crowd, lining the parapet far as Logen could see in both directions. Hundreds of folk – fighting men, women, children even, up on shoulders. Everyone in the city, it looked like. Metal squealed, and wood creaked, and the tall gates ever so slowly swung apart, the glare of the rising sun spilling out the crack between, then pouring bright through the open archway. Two lines of men came tramping out. Carls, all hard faces and tangled hair, heavy mail jingling, painted shields on their arms.

Logen knew a few of them. Some of Bethod's closest, who'd been with him since the beginning. Hard men all, who'd held the shields for Logen more than once, back in the old days. They formed up in their own half-ring, closing the circle tight. A wall of shields – animal faces, trees and towers, flowing water, crossed axes, all of them scarred and scuffed from a hundred old fights. All of them turned in towards Logen. A cage of men and wood, and the only way out was to kill. Or to die, of course.

A black shape formed in the bright archway. Like a man, but taller, seeming to fill it all the way to the high keystone. Logen heard footsteps. Thumping footsteps, heavy as falling anvils. A strange kind of fear tugged at him. A mindless panic, as if he'd woken trapped under the snow again. He forced himself not to look over his shoulder at Crummock, forced himself to look ahead as Bethod's champion stepped out into the dawn.

'By the fucking dead,' breathed Logen.

He thought at first it must be some trick of the light that made him look the size he did. Tul Duru Thunderhead had been a big bastard, no doubt, big enough that some had called him a giant. But he'd still looked like a man. Fenris the Feared was built on such a scale that he seemed something else. A race apart. A giant indeed, stepped out from old stories and made flesh. A lot of flesh.

His face squirmed as he walked, great bald head jerking from side to side. His mouth sneered and grinned, his eyes winked and bulged by turns. One half of him was blue. No other way to put it. A neat line down his face divided blue skin from pale. His huge right arm was white. His left was blue all the long way from shoulder to the tips of his great fingers. In that hand he carried a sack, swinging back and forward with each step, bulging as if it was stuffed with hammers.

A couple of Bethod's shield-carriers cringed out of his way, looking like children beside him, grimacing as if death itself was breathing on their necks. The Feared stepped through into the circle, and Logen saw the blue marks were writing, just as the spirit had told him. Twisted symbols, scrawled over every part of his left side – hand, arm, face, lips even. The words of Glustrod, written in the Old Time.

The Feared stopped a few strides distant, and a sickly horror seemed to wash out from him and over the silent crowd, as if a great weight was pressing on Logen's chest, squeezing out his courage. But the task was simple enough,

in its way. If the Feared's painted side couldn't be harmed, Logen would just have to carve the rest of him, and carve it deep. He'd beaten some hard men in the circle. Ten of the hardest bastards in all the North. This was just one more. Or so he tried to tell himself.

'Where's Bethod?' He'd meant to bellow it, all defiance, but it came out a tame, dry squawk.

'I can watch you die just as well from up here!' The King of the Northmen stood on the battlements above the open gate, well-groomed and happy, Pale-as-Snow and a few guards stood about him. If he'd had any trouble sleeping, Logen would never have known it. The morning breeze stirred his hair and the thick fur round his shoulders, the morning sun shone on the golden chain, struck sparks from the diamond on his brow. 'Glad you came! I was worried you'd make a run for it!' He gave a carefree sigh and it smoked on the sharp air. 'It's morning, like you said. Let's get started.'

Logen looked into the Feared's bulging, twitching, crazy eyes, and swallowed.

'We're gathered here to witness a challenge!' roared Crummock. 'A challenge to put an end to this war, and settle the blood between Bethod, who's taken to calling himself King of the Northmen, and Furious, who speaks for the Union. Bethod wins, the siege is lifted, and the Union leaves the North. Furious wins, then the gates of Carleon are opened, and Bethod stands at his mercy. Do I speak true?'

'You do,' said West, his voice sounding small in all that space.

'Aye.' Up on his walls, Bethod waved a lazy hand. 'Get to it, fat man.'

'Then name yourselves, champions!' shouted Crummock, 'and list your pedigree!'

Logen took a step forward. It was a hard step to take, as if he was pushing against a great wind, but he took it anyway, tilted his head back and looked the Feared full in his writhing face. 'I'm the Bloody-Nine, and there's no number on the men I've killed.' The words came out soft and dead. No pride in his empty voice, but no fear either. A cold fact. Cold as the winter. 'Ten challenges I've given, and I won 'em all. In this circle I beat Shama Heartless, Rudd Threetrees, Harding Grim, Tul Duru Thunderhead, Black Dow, and more besides. If I listed the Named Men I've put back in the mud we'd be here at sunrise tomorrow. There's not a man in the North don't know my work.'

Nothing changed in the giant's face. Nothing more than usual, at least. 'My name is Fenris the Feared. My achievements are all in the past.' He held up his painted hand, and squeezed the great fingers, and the sinews in his huge blue arm bulged like knotted tree roots. 'With these signs great Glustrod marked me out his chosen. With this hand I tore down the statues of Aulcus. Now I kill little men, in little wars.' Logen could just make out a tiny shrug of his massive shoulders. 'Such is the way of things.'

Crummock looked at Logen, and he raised his brows. 'Alright then. What weapons have you carried to the fight?'

Logen lifted the heavy sword, forged by Kanedias for his war against the Magi, and held it up to the light. A stride of dull metal, the edge glittered faintly in the pale sunrise. 'This blade.' He stabbed it down into the earth between them and left it standing there.

The Feared threw his sack rattling down and it sagged open. Inside were great black plates, spiked and studded, scarred and battered. 'This armour.' Logen looked at that vast weight of dark iron, and licked his teeth. If the Feared won the spin he could take the sword and leave Logen with a pile of useless armour way too big for him. What would he do then? Hide under it? He only had to hope his luck stuck out a few minutes longer.

'Alright, my beauties.' Crummock set his shield down on its rim and took hold of the edge. 'Painted or plain, Ninefingers?'

'Painted.' Crummock ripped the shield round and set it spinning. Round and round, it went – painted, plain, painted, plain. Hope and despair swapped with every turn. The wood started to slow, to wobble on its rim. It dropped down flat, plain side up, the straps flopping.

So much for luck.

Crummock winced. He looked up at the giant. 'You've got the choice, big lad.'

The Feared took hold of the Maker's blade and slid it from the earth. It looked like a toy in his monstrous hand. His bulging eyes rolled up to Logen's, and his great mouth twisted into a smile. He tossed the sword down at Logen's feet and it dropped in the dirt.

'Take your knife, little man.'

The sound of raised voices floated thin on the breeze. 'Alright,' hissed Dow, much too loud for the Dogman's nerves, 'they're getting started!'

'I can hear that!' Dogman snapped, coiling the rope round and round into easy circles, ready to throw.

'You know what you're doing with that? I could do without it dropping on me.'

'That so?' Dogman swung the grapple back and forward a touch, feeling the weight. 'I was just thinking that, after it sticking in that wall, it sticking in your fat head was the second best outcome.' He spun it round in a circle, then a wider one, letting some rope slip through his hand, then he hefted it all the way and let it fly. It sailed up, real neat, the rope uncoiling after it, and over the battlements. Dogman winced as he heard it clatter on the walkway, but no one came. He pulled on the rope. A stride or two slid down, and then it caught. Felt firm as a rock.

'First time,' said Grim.

Dogman nodded, hardly able to believe it himself. 'What are the odds? Who's first?'

Dow grinned at him. 'Whoever's got hold o' the rope now, I reckon.'

As the Dogman started climbing, he found he was going over all the ways a man could get killed going up this wall. Grapple slipped, and he fell. Rope frayed, and snapped, and he fell. Someone had seen the grapple, was waiting for him to get to the top before they cut the rope. Or they were waiting for him to get to the top before they cut his throat. Or they were just now calling for a dozen big men to take prisoner whatever idiot it was trying to climb into a city on his own.

His boots scuffled at the rough stone, the hemp bit at his hands, his arms burned at the work, and all the while he did his best to keep his rasping breath quiet. The battlements edged closer, then closer, then he was there. He hooked his fingers onto the stone and peered over. The walkway was empty, both ways. He slipped over the parapet, sliding a knife out, just in case. You can never have too many knives, and all that. He checked the grapple was caught firm, then he leaned over, saw Dow at the bottom looking up, Grim with the rope in his hands, one foot on the wall, ready to climb. Dogman beckoned to him to say come, watched him start up, hand over hand, Dow holding to the bottom of the rope to stop it flapping. Soon enough he was halfway—

‘What the fuck—’

Dogman jerked his head left. There were a pair of Thralls not far off, just stepped out from a door to the nearest tower and onto the wall. They stared at him, and he stared back, seemed like the longest time.

‘There’s a rope here!’ he shouted, brandishing his knife around and making like he was trying to cut it away from the grapple. ‘Some bastard’s trying to climb in!’

‘By the dead!’ One came running, gawped down at Grim swinging around. ‘He’s coming up now!’

The other one pulled his sword out. ‘Don’t worry ’bout that.’ He lifted it, grinning, ready to chop through the rope. Then he stopped. ‘Here – why you all muddy?’

Dogman stabbed him in the chest, hard as he could, and again. ‘Eeeeeee!’ wailed the Thrall, face screwed up, lurching back against the battlements and dropping his sword over the side. His mate came charging up, swinging a big mace. Dogman ducked under it, but the Thrall barrelled into him and brought him down on his back, head cracking on stone.

The mace clattered away and they wrestled around, the Thrall kicking and punching while Dogman tried to get his hands round his throat, stop him from calling out. They rolled over one way, then back the other, struggled up to standing and tottered about down the walkway. The Thrall got his shoulder in Dogman’s armpit and shoved him back up against the battlements, trying to bundle him over.

‘Shit,’ gasped the Dogman as his feet left the ground. He could feel his arse scraping the stone, but still he clung on, hands tight round the Thrall’s neck, stopping him getting a good breath. He went up another inch, felt his head forced back, almost more weight on the wrong side of the parapet than the right.

‘Over you go, you fucker!’ croaked the Thrall, working his chin away from Dogman’s hands and pushing him a touch further, ‘over you—’ His eyes went wide. He stumbled back, a shaft sticking out of his side. ‘Oh, I don’t—’ Another thumped into his neck and he lurched a step, would’ve fallen off the back of the wall if the Dogman hadn’t grabbed his arm and dragged him down onto the walkway, held him there while he slobbered his last breaths.

When he was finished, Dogman rolled up and stood bent over the corpse, breathing. Grim hurried over, taking a good look around to make sure no one else was likely to happen by. ‘Alright?’

‘Just once. Just once I’d like to get the help before I’m at the point o’ getting killed.’

‘Better’n after.’ The Dogman had to admit there was some truth to that. He watched Dow pull himself over the battlements and roll down onto the walkway. The Thrall Dogman had stabbed was still breathing, just about, sat near the grapple. Dow chopped a piece out of his skull with his axe as he walked past, careless as if he was chopping logs.

He shook his head. ‘I leave the two o’ you alone for ten breaths together and look what happens. Two dead men, eh?’ Dow leaned down, stuck two fingers in one of the holes Dogman’s knife had made, pulled them out and smeared blood across one side of his face. He grinned up. ‘What do you reckon we can do with two dead men?’

The Feared seemed to fill the circle, one half bare and blue, the other cased in black iron, a monster torn free from legends. There was nowhere to hide from his great fists, nowhere to hide from the fear of him. Shields rattled and clashed, men roared and bellowed, a sea of blurred faces twisted with mad fury.

Logen crept around the edge of the short grass, trying to keep light on his feet. He might’ve been smaller, but he was quicker, cleverer. At least he hoped he was. He had to be, or he was mud. Keep moving, rolling, ducking, stay out of the way and pick his moment. Above all, don’t get hit. Not getting hit was the first thing.

The giant came at him out of nowhere, his great tattooed fist a blue blur. Logen threw himself out of the way but it still grazed his cheek and caught his shoulder, sent him stumbling. So much for not getting hit. A shield, and not a friendly one, shoved him in the back and he lurched the other way, head whipping forward. He pitched on his face, nearly cut himself on his own sword, rolled desperately to the side and saw the Feared’s huge boot thud into the ground, soil flying where his skull had been a moment before.

Logen scrambled up in time to see the blue hand coming at him again. He ducked underneath it, hacked at the Feared’s tattooed flesh as he reeled past. The Maker’s sword thudded deep into the giant’s thigh like a spade into turf. The huge leg buckled and he dropped forward onto his armoured knee. It should have been a killing blow, right through the big veins, but there was hardly more blood than from a shaving-scratch.

Still, if one thing fails you try another. Logen roared as he chopped at the Feared’s bald head. The blade clanged against the armour on the giant’s right arm, raised just in time. It scraped down that black steel and slid off, harmless, chopping into the earth and leaving Logen’s hands buzzing.

‘Ooof!’ The Feared’s knee sank into his gut, folded him up and sent him staggering, needing to cough but not having the air to do it. The giant had already found his feet again, armoured hand swinging back, a lump of black iron the size of a man’s head. Logen dived sideways, rolling across the short grass, felt the wind of the great arm ripping past him. It crashed into the shield where he’d been standing, broke it into splintered pieces, flung the man

holding it wailing into the earth.

It seemed the spirit had been right. The painted side couldn't be hurt. Logen crouched, waiting for the clawing pain in his stomach to fade enough for him to breathe, trying to think of some trick to use and coming up with nothing. The Feared turned his writhing face towards Logen. Behind him on the ground the felled man whimpered under the wreckage of his shield. The Carls either side of him shuffled in to close the gap with some reluctance.

The giant took a slow step forwards, and Logen took a painful step back.

'Still alive,' he whispered to himself. But how long for, it was hard to say.

West had never in his life felt so scared, so exhilarated, so very much alive. Not even when he won the Contest with all the wide Square of Marshals cheering for him. Not even when he stormed the walls of Ulrioch, and burst out from the dust and chaos into the warm sunlight.

His skin tingled with hope and horror. His hands jerked helplessly with Ninefingers' movements. His lips murmured pointless advice, silent encouragement. Beside him Pike and Jalenhorm jostled, shoved, shouted themselves hoarse. Behind them the wide crowd roared, straining to see. On the walls they leaned out, screaming and shaking their fists in the air. The circle of men flexed with the movements of the fighters, never still, bowing out and sucking in as the champions came forward or fell back.

And almost always, so far, the one falling back was Ninefingers. A great brute of a man by most standards, he seemed tiny, weak and brittle in that terrifying company. To make matters a great deal worse, there was something very strange at work here. Something West could only have called magic. Great wounds, deadly wounds, closed in the Feared's blue skin before his very eyes. This thing was not a man. It could only be a devil, and whenever it towered over him West felt a fear as though he was standing at the very verge of hell.

West grimaced as Ninefingers lurched helplessly against the shields on the far side of the circle. The Feared raised his armoured fist to deliver a blow that could surely crush a skull to jelly. But it hit nothing but air. Ninefingers jerked away at the last moment and let the iron miss his jaw by a hair. His heavy sword slashed down, bounced off the Feared's armoured shoulder with a resounding clang. The giant stumbled back and Ninefingers came after him, pale scars stretched on his rigid face.

'Yes!' hissed West, the men around him bellowing their approval.

The next blow shrieked down the giant's armoured side, leaving a long, bright scratch and digging up a great sod of earth. The last chopped deep into his painted ribs and spat out a misty spray of blood, knocked him flailing off balance. West's mouth opened wide as the great shadow fell across him. The Feared toppled against his shield like a falling tree and drove him trembling to his knees, wilting under the great weight, his stomach rolling with horror and disgust.

Then he saw it. One of the buckles on the spiked and studded armour, just below the giant's knee, was inches from the fingers of West's free hand. All he

could think of, in that moment, was that Bethod might escape, after all the dead men he had left, scattered up and down the length of Angland. He gritted his teeth and snatched hold of the end of the leather strap, thick as a man's belt. He dragged at it as the Feared shoved his huge bulk up. The buckle came jingling open, the armour on the mighty calf flapped loose as his foot thumped down again, as his arm lashed out and knocked Ninefingers stumbling away.

West struggled from the dirt, already greatly regretting his impulsiveness. He glanced around the circle, searching for any sign that someone had seen him, but all eyes were fixed on the fighters. It seemed now a tiny, petulant sort of sabotage that could never make the slightest difference. Beyond getting him killed, of course. It was a fact he had known from childhood. Catch you cheating in a Northern duel, and they'll cut the bloody cross in you and pull your guts out.



'Gah!' Logen jerked away from the armoured fist, tottered to his right as the blue one rushed past his face, dived to his left as the iron hand lashed at him again, slid and nearly fell. Any one of those blows had been hard enough to take his head off. He saw the painted arm go back, gritted his teeth as he dodged around another of the Feared's mighty punches, already swinging the sword up and over.

The blade sheared neatly through the blue arm, just below the elbow, sent it tumbling away across the circle along with a gout of blood. Logen heaved air into his burning lungs and raised the Maker's sword high, setting himself for one last effort. The Feared's eyes rolled up towards the dull grey blade. He jerked his head to one side and it chopped deep into his painted skull, showering out specks of dark blood and splitting his head down to the eyebrow.

The giant's armoured elbow crunched into Logen's ribs, half-lifted him off his feet and flung him kicking across the circle. He bounced from a shield and sprawled on his face, lay there spitting out dirt while the blurry world spun around him.

He winced as he pushed himself up, blinked the tears out of his eyes, and froze. The Feared stepped forward, sword still buried deep in his skull, and picked up his severed arm. He pressed it against the bloodless stump, twisted it to the right, then back to the left, and let it go. The great forearm was whole again, the letters ran from shoulder to wrist unbroken.

The men around the circle fell silent. The giant worked his blue fingers for a moment, then he reached up and closed his hand around the hilt of the Maker's sword. He turned it one way, then the other, his skull crunching as bone shifted. He dragged the blade free, shook his head as if to clear a touch of dizziness. Then he tossed the sword across the circle and it clattered down in front of Logen for the second time that day.

Logen stared at it, his chest heaving. It was getting heavier with each exchange. The wounds he'd taken in the mountains ached, the blows he'd

taken in the circle throbbed. The air was still cold but his shirt was sticky with sweat.

The Feared showed no sign of tiring, even with half a ton of iron strapped to his body. There wasn't so much as a bead of sweat on his twisting face. Not so much as a scratch on his tattooed scalp.

Logen felt the fear pressing hard on him again. He knew now how the mouse felt, when the cat had him between his paws. He should've run. He should've run and never looked back, but instead he'd chosen this. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that bastard never learns. The giant's mouth crawled up into a wriggling smile.

'More,' he said.



Dogman needed to piss as he walked up to the gate of Carleon's inner wall. Always needed to piss at times like this.

He had one of the dead Thrall's clothes on, big enough that he'd had to pull the belt too tight, cloak hanging over the bloody knife hole in the shirt. Grim was wearing the other's gear, bow over one shoulder, the big mace hanging from his free hand. Dow slumped between them, wrists tied at his back, feet scraping stupidly at the cobbles, bloody head hanging like they'd given him quite the beating.

Seemed a pitiful kind of a ruse, if the Dogman was being honest. There were fifty things he'd counted since they climbed off the walls that could've given them away. But there was no time for anything cleverer. Talk well, and smile, and no one would notice the clues. That's what he hoped anyway.

A guard stood each side of the wide archway, a pair of Carls in long mail coats and helmets, both with spears in their hands.

'What's this?' one asked, frowning as they walked up close.

'Found this bastard trying to creep in.' Dogman gave Dow a punch in the side of the head, just to make things look good. 'We're taking him down below, lock him up 'til after they're done.' He made to walk on past.

One of the guards stopped him cold with a hand on his chest, and the Dogman swallowed. The Carl nodded towards the city's gates. 'How's it going, down there?'

'Alright, I guess.' Dogman shrugged. 'It's going, anyway. Bethod'll come out on top, eh? He always does, don't he?'

'I don't know.' The Carl shook his head. 'That Feared puts the fucking wind up me. Him and that bloody witch. Can't say I'll cry too hard if the Bloody-Nine kills the pair of 'em.'

The other one chuckled, pushed his helmet onto the back of his scalp, bringing up a cloth to wipe the sweat underneath. 'You got a—'

Dow sprang forward, loose bits of rope flapping round his wrists, and buried a knife all the way up to the hilt in the Carl's forehead. Dropped him like a chair with the legs kicked away. Same moment almost, Grim's borrowed mace clonked into the top of the other's helmet and left a great dent in it, jammed

the rim right down almost to the tip of his nose. He dribbled some, stumbling back like he was drunk. Then blood came bubbling out of his ears and he fell down on his back.

Dogman turned round, trying to hold his stolen cloak out so no one would see Dow and Grim dragging the two corpses away, but the town seemed empty. Everyone watching the fight, no doubt. He wondered for a moment what was happening, out there in the circle. Long enough to get a nasty feeling in his gut.

'Come on.' He turned to see Dow grinning all across his bloody face. The two bodies he'd just wedged behind the gates, one of 'em staring cross-eyed at the knife hole in his head.

'That good enough?' asked Dogman.

'What, you want to say a few words for the dead, do you?'

'You know what I mean, if someone—'

'No time for clever, now.' Dow grabbed him by the arm and pulled him through the gate. 'Let's kill us a witch.'

The sole of the Feared's metal boot thudded into Logen's chest, ripped his breath out and rammed him into the earth, the sword tumbling from his clawing hand, puke burning at the back of his throat. Before he knew where he was a great shadow fell across him. Metal snapped shut round his wrist, tight as a vice. His legs were kicked away and he was on his face, arm twisted behind him and a mouthful of dirt to think about. Something pressed against his cheek. Cold at first, then painful. The Feared's great foot. His wrist was wrenched round, dragged up. His head was crushed further into the damp ground, short grass prickling up his nose.

The tearing pain in his shoulder was awful. Soon it was a lot worse. He was caught fast and helpless, stretched out like a rabbit for skinning. The crowd had fallen breathlessly silent, the only sound the battered flesh round Logen's mouth squelching, the air squeaking in one squashed nostril. He would've screamed if his face hadn't been so squeezed that he could scarcely wheeze in half a breath. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that he's finished. Back to the mud, and no one could've said he hadn't earned it. A fitting end for the Bloody-Nine, torn apart in the circle.

But the great arms didn't pull any further. Out the corner of one flickering eye, Logen could just see Bethod leaning against the battlements. The King of the Northmen waved his hand, round and round, in a slow wheel. Logen remembered what it meant.

Take your time. Make it last. Show them all a lesson they'll never forget.

The Feared's great boot slid off his jaw and Logen felt himself dragged into the air, limbs flopping like a puppet with the strings cut. The tattooed hand went up, black against the sun, and slapped Logen across the face. Open-handed, as a father might cuff a troublesome child. It was like being hit with a pan. Light burst open in Logen's skull, his mouth filled with blood. Things drew into focus just in time for him to see the painted hand swing back the other way. It came down with a terrible inevitability and cracked him a

backhand blow, as a jealous husband might crack his helpless wife.

‘Gurgh—’ he heard himself say, and he was flying. Blue sky, blinding sun, yellow grass, staring faces, all meaningless smears. He crashed into the shields at the edge of the circle, flopped half-senseless to the earth. Far away men were shouting, screaming, hissing, but he couldn’t hear the words, and hardly cared. All he could think about was the cold feeling in his stomach. As if his guts were stuffed with swelling ice.

He saw a pale hand, smeared with pink blood, white tendons starting from the scratched skin. His hand, of course. There was the stump. But when he tried to make the fingers open they only clutched tighter at the brown earth.

‘Yes,’ he whispered, and blood drooled out of his numb mouth and trickled into the grass. The ice spread out from his stomach, out to the very tips of his fingers and turned every part of him numb. It was well that it did. It was high time.

‘Yes,’ he said. Up, up onto one knee, his bloody lips curling back from his teeth, his bloody right hand snaking through the grass, seeking out the hilt of the Maker’s sword, closing tight around it.

‘Yes!’ he hissed, and Logen laughed, and the Bloody-Nine laughed, together.

West had not expected Ninefingers to get up, not ever again, but he did, and when he did, he was laughing. It sounded almost like weeping at first, a slobbering giggle, shrill and strange, but it grew louder, sharper, colder as he rose. As if at a cruel joke that no one else could see. A fatal joke. His head fell sideways like a hanged man’s, livid face all slack around a hacked-out grin.

Blood stained his teeth pink, trickled from the cuts on his face, seeped from his torn lips. The laughter gurgled up louder, and louder, ripping at West’s ears, jagged as a saw-blade. More agonised than any scream, more furious than any war-cry. Awfully, sickeningly wrong. Chuckling at a massacre. Slaughterhouse giggling.

Ninefingers lurched forwards like a drunken man, swaying, wild, sword dangling from his bloody fist. His dead eyes glittered, wet and staring, pupils swollen to two black pits. His mad laughter cut, and grated, and hacked around the circle. West felt himself edging back, mouth dry. All the crowd edged back. They no longer knew who scared them more: Fenris the Feared, or the Bloody-Nine.

The world burned.

His skin was on fire. His breath was scalding steam. The sword was a brand of molten metal in his fist.

The sun stamped white-hot patterns into his prickling eyes, and the cold grey shapes of men, and shields, and walls, and of a giant made from blue words and black iron. Fear washed out from him in sickly waves, but the Bloody-Nine only smiled the wider. Fear and pain were fuel on the fire, and the flames surged high, and higher yet.

The world burned, and at its centre the Bloody-Nine burned hottest of all.

He held out his hand, and he curled the three fingers, and he beckoned.

‘I am waiting,’ he said.

The great fists lashed at the Bloody-Nine’s face, the great hands snatched at his body. But all the giant caught was laughter. Easier to strike the flickering fire. Easier to catch the rolling smoke.

The circle was an oven. The blades of yellow grass were tongues of yellow flame beneath it. The sweat, spit, blood dripped onto it like gravy from cooking meat.

The Bloody-Nine made a hiss, water on coals. The hiss became a growl, iron spattering from the forge. The growl became a great roar, the dry forest in flames, and he let the sword go free.

The grey metal made searing circles, hacked bloodless holes in blue flesh, rang on black iron. The giant faded away and the blade bit into the face of one of the men holding the shields. His head burst apart and sprayed blood across another, a hole torn from the wall around the circle. The others shuffled back, shields wavering, the circle swelling with their fear. They feared him more even than the giant, and they were wise to. Everything that lived was his enemy, and when the Bloody-Nine had made pieces of this devil-thing, he would set to work on them.

The circle was a cauldron. On the walls above the crowd surged like angry steam. The ground shifted and swelled under the Bloody-Nine’s feet like boiling oil.

His roar became a scalding scream, the sword flashed down and clashed from spiked armour like a hammer on the anvil. The giant pressed his blue hand to the pale side of his head, face squirming like a nest of maggots. The blade had missed his skull, but stolen away the top half of his ear. Blood bubbled out from the wound, ran down the side of his great neck in two thin lines, and did not stop.

The great eyes went wide and the giant sprang forward with a thundering bellow. The Bloody-Nine rolled under his flailing fist and slid round behind him, saw the black iron on his leg flap away, the bright buckle dangling. The sword snaked out and slid into the gap, ate deep into the great pale calf inside it. The giant roared in pain, spun, lurched on his wounded leg and fell to his knees.

The circle was a crucible. The screaming faces of the men around its edge danced like smoke, swam like molten metal, their shields melting together.

Now was the time. The morning sun blazed down, glinted bright on the heavy chest-plate, marking the spot. Now was the beautiful moment.

The world burned, and like a leaping flame the Bloody-Nine reared up, arching back, raising high the sword. The work of Kanedias, the Master Maker, no blade forged sharper. Its bitter edge scored a long gash in the black armour, through the iron and into the soft flesh beneath, striking sparks and spattering blood, the shriek of tortured metal mingling with the wail of pain torn from the Feared’s twisted mouth. The wound it left in him was deep.

But not deep enough.

The giant’s great arms slid round the Bloody-Nine’s back, folding him in a smothering embrace. The edges of the black metal pierced his flesh in a dozen places. Closer the giant drew him, and closer, and a ragged spike slid into the

Bloody-Nine's face, cut through his cheek and scraped against his teeth, bit into the side of his tongue and filled his mouth with salt blood.

The Feared's grip was the weight of mountains. No matter how hot the Bloody-Nine's rage, no matter how he squirmed, and thrashed, and screamed in fury, he was held as tightly as the cold earth holds the buried dead. The blood trickling from his face, and from his back, and from the great gash in the Feared's armour soaked into his clothes and spread out blazing hot over his skin.

The world burned. Above the oven, the cauldron, the crucible, Bethod nodded, and the giant's cold arms squeezed tighter.

Dogman followed his nose. It rarely led him wrong, his nose, and he hoped to hell that it didn't fail him now. It was a sickly kind of a smell – like sweet cakes left too long in the oven. He led the others along an empty hallway, down a shadowy stair, creeping through the damp darkness in the knotty bowels of Skarling's Hill. He could hear something now, as well as smell it, and it sounded as bad as it smelled. A woman's voice, singing soft and low. A strange kind of singing, in no tongue the Dogman could understand.

'That must be her,' muttered Dow.

'Don't like the sound o' that one bit,' Dogman whispered back. 'Sounds like magic.'

'What d'you expect? She's a fucking witch ain't she? I'll go round behind.'

'No, wait on—' But Dow was already creeping off the other way, boots padding soft and silent.

'Shit.' Dogman followed the smell, creeping down the passageway with Grim at his back, the chanting coming louder and louder. A streak of light slunk out from an archway and he eased towards it, pressed his side to the wall and took a peer round the corner.

The room on the other side had about as witchy a look as a room could ever have. Dark and windowless, three other black doorways round the walls. It was lit just by one smoky brazier up at the far end, sizzling coals shedding a dirty red light on it all, giving off a sick sweet stink. There were jars and pots scattered all round, bundles of twigs, and grass, and dried-out flowers hanging from the greasy rafters, casting strange shadows into the corners, like the shapes of hanged men swinging.

There was a woman standing over the brazier with her back to the Dogman. Her long, white arms were spread out wide, shining with sweat. Gold glinted round her thin wrists, black hair straggled down her back. The Dogman might not have known the words she was singing but he could guess it was some dark work she was up to.

Grim held up his bow, one eyebrow raised. Dogman shook his head, silently drew his knife. Tricky to kill her right off with a shaft, and who knew what she might do once she was shot? Cold steel in the neck left nothing to chance.

Together they crept into the room. The air was hot in there, thick as swamp water. Dogman sneaked forward, trying not to breathe, sure the reek would throttle him if he did. He sweated, or the room did, leastways his skin was

beaded up with dew in no time. He picked his steps, finding a path between all the rubbish strewn across the floor – boxes, bundles, bottles. He worked his damp palm round the grip of his knife, fixed his eyes on the point between her shoulders, the point he'd stab it into—

His foot caught a jar and sent it clattering. The woman's head jerked round, the chant stopped dead on her lips. A gaunt, white face, pale as a drowned man's, black paint round her narrow eyes – blue eyes, cold as the ocean.

The circle was silent. The men around its edge were still, their faces and their shields hanging limp. The crowd at their backs, the people pressed to the parapet above, all held motionless, all quiet as the dead.

For all of Ninefingers' mad rage, for all his twisting and his struggling, the giant had him fast. Thick muscles squirmed under blue skin as the Feared's great arms tightened and slowly crushed the life from him. West's mouth was bitter with helpless disappointment. All that he had done, all that he had suffered, all those lives lost, for nothing. Bethod would go free.

Then Ninefingers gave an animal growl. The Feared held him still, but his blue arm was trembling with the effort. As if he was suddenly weakened, and could squeeze no further. Every sinew of West's own body was rigid as he watched. The thick strap of the shield bit into his palm. His jaw was clenched so tight that his teeth ached. The two fighters were locked together, straining against each other with every fibre and yet entirely still, frozen in the centre of the circle.

The Dogman sprang forward, knife raised and ready.

'Stop.'

He froze solid in a moment. He'd never heard a voice like it. One word and there was no thought in his head. He stared at the pale woman, his mouth open, his breath hardly moving, wishing that she'd say another.

'You too,' she said, glancing over at Grim, and his face went slack, and he grinned, halfway through drawing his bow.

She looked Dogman up and down, then pouted as if she was all disappointment. 'Is that any way for guests to behave?'

Dogman blinked. What the hell had he been thinking barging in here with a drawn blade? He couldn't believe he'd done such a thing. He blushed to the roots of his hair. 'Oh . . . I'm sorry . . . by the dead . . .'

'Gugh!' said Grim, throwing his bow into the corner of the room as if he'd suddenly realised he had a turd in his hand, then staring down at the arrow, baffled.

'That's better.' She smiled, and the Dogman found he was grinning like an idiot. Some spit might've come out of his mouth maybe, just a bit, but he weren't that bothered. As long as she kept talking nothing else seemed o' too much importance. She beckoned to them, long white fingers stroking at the thick air. 'No need to stand so far away from me. Come closer.'

Him and Grim stumbled towards her like eager children, Dogman near

tripping over his feet in his hurry to please, Grim barging into a table on the way and coming close to falling on his face.

‘My name is Caurib.’

‘Oh,’ said Dogman. Most beautiful name ever, no doubt about it. Amazing, that a single word could be so beautiful.

‘Harding Grim’s my name!’

‘Dogman, they call me, ’count of a sharp sense o’ smell, and . . . er . . .’ By the dead, but it was hard to think straight. There’d been something important he was meant to be doing, but for the life of him he couldn’t think what.

‘Dogman . . . perfect.’ Her voice was soothing as a warm bath, as a soft kiss, as milk and honey . . . ‘Don’t sleep yet!’ Dogman’s head rolled, Caurib’s painted face a black and white blur, swimming in front of him.

‘Sorry!’ he gurgled, blushing again and trying to hide the knife behind his back. ‘Right sorry about the blade . . . no idea what—’

‘Don’t worry. I am glad that you brought it. I think it would be best if you used it to stab your friend.’

‘Him?’ Dogman squinted at Grim.

Grim grinned and nodded back at him. ‘Aye, definitely!’

‘Right, right, good idea.’ Dogman lifted up the knife, seeming to weigh a ton. ‘Er . . . anywhere you’d like him stabbed, in particular?’

‘In the heart will do nicely.’

‘Right you are. Right. The heart it is.’ Grim turned front on to give him a better go at it. Dogman blinked, wiped some sweat from his forehead. ‘Here we go, then.’ Damn it but he was dizzy. He squinted at Grim’s chest, wanting to make sure he got it right first time, and didn’t embarrass himself again. ‘Here we go . . .’

‘Now!’ she hissed at him. ‘Just get it—’

The axe blade made a clicking sound as it split her head neatly down the middle, all the way to her chin. Blood sprayed out and splattered in Dogman’s gawping face, and the witch’s thin body slumped down on the stones like it was made of nothing but rags.

Dow frowned as he twisted the haft of his axe this way and that, until the blade came free of Caurib’s ruined skull with a faint sucking sound. ‘That bitch talks too much,’ he grunted.

The Bloody-Nine felt the change. Like the first green shoot of spring. Like the first warmth on the wind as the summer comes. There was a message in the way the Feared held him. His bones were no longer groaning, threatening to burst apart. The giant’s strength was less, and his was more.

The Bloody-Nine sucked in the air and his rage burned hot as ever. Slowly, slowly, he dragged his face away from the giant’s shoulder, felt the metal slide out from his mouth. He twisted, twisted until his neck was free. Until he was staring into the giant’s writhing face. The Bloody-Nine smiled, then he darted forward, fast as a shower of sparks, and sank his teeth deep into that big lower lip.

The giant grunted, shifted his arms, tried to drag the Bloody-Nine’s head

away, tear the biting teeth out of his mouth. But he could more easily have shaken off the plague. His arms loosened and the Bloody-Nine twisted the hand that held the Maker's sword. He twisted it, as the snake twists in its nest, and slowly he began to work it free.

The giant's blue left arm uncoiled from the Bloody-Nine's body, his blue hand seized hold of the Bloody-Nine's wrist, but there could be no stopping it. When the sapling seed finds a crack in the mountain, over long years its deep roots will burst the very rock apart. So the Bloody-Nine strained with every muscle and let the slow time pass, hissing out his hatred into the Feared's twitching mouth. The blade crept onwards, slowly, slowly, and its very point bit into painted flesh, just below the giant's bottom rib.

The Bloody-Nine felt the hot blood trickling down the grip and over his bunched fist, trickling out of the Feared's mouth and into his, running down his neck, leaking from the wounds across his back, dripping to the ground, just as it should be. Softly, gently, the blade slid into the Feared's tattooed body, sideways, upwards, onwards.

The great hands clawed at the Bloody-Nine's arm, at his back, seeking desperately for some hold that might stop the terrible easing forward of that blade. But with every moment the giant's strength melted away, like ice before a furnace. Easier to stop the Whiteflow than to stop the Bloody-Nine. The movement of his hands was the growing of a mighty tree, one hair's breadth at a time, but no flesh, no stone, no metal could stop it.

The giant's painted side could not be harmed. Great Glustrod had made it so, long years ago, in the Old Time, when the words were written upon the Feared's skin. But Glustrod wrote on one half only. Slowly, now, softly, gently, the point of the Maker's sword crossed the divide and into the unmarked half of him, dug into his innards, spitted him like meat made ready for the fire.

The giant made a great, high shriek, and the last strength melted from his hands. The Bloody-Nine opened his jaws and let him free, one arm holding tight to his back while the other drove the sword on into him. The Bloody-Nine hissed laughter through his clenched teeth, dribbled laughter through the ragged hole in his face. He rammed the blade as far as it would go, and its point slid out between the plates of armour just beneath the giant's armpit and glinted red in the sun.

Fennis the Feared tottered backwards, still making his long squeal, his mouth hanging open and a string of red spit dangling from his lip, the painted half already healed over, the pale half tattered as mince-meat. The circle of men watched him, frozen, gaping over the tops of their shields. His feet shuffled in the dirt, one hand fumbling for the red hilt of the Maker's sword, buried to the cross-piece in his side, blood dripping from the pommel and leaving red spots scattered across the ground. His squeal became a rattling groan, one foot tripped the other and he toppled like a felled tree and crashed over on his back, in the centre of the circle, great arms and legs spread wide. The twitching of his face was finally still, and there was a long silence.

'By the dead.' It was spoken softly, thoughtfully. Logen squinted into the morning sun, saw the black shape of a man looking down at him from the high gatehouse. 'By the dead, I never thought you'd do it.' The world tipped from side to side as Logen began to walk, the breath hissing cold through the

wound in his face, scraping in his raw throat. The men who'd made the circle moved out of his way, now, their voices fallen silent, their shields hanging from their hands.

'Never thought you could do it, but when it comes to killing, there's no man better! No man worse! I've always said so!'

Logen tottered through the open gates, found an archway and began to climb the lurching steps, round and round, his boots hissing against the stone and leaving dark smears behind. The blood dripped, tap, tap, tap from the dangling fingers of his left hand. Every muscle ached. Bethod's voice dug at him.

'But I get the last laugh, eh, Bloody-Nine? You're nothing but leaves on the water! Any way the rain washes you!'

Logen stumbled on, ribs burning, jaws locked tight together, shoulder scraping against the curved wall. Up, and up, and round, and round, his crackling breath echoing after.

'You'll never have anything! You'll never be anything! You'll never make anything but corpses!'

Out onto the roof, blinking in the morning brightness, spitting a mouthful of blood over his shoulder. Bethod stood at the battlements. The Named Men stumbled out of Logen's way as he strode towards him.

'You're made of death, Bloody-Nine! You're made of—'

Logen's fist crunched into his jaw and he took a flopping step back. Logen's other hand smashed into his cheek and he reeled against the parapet, a long string of bloody drool running from his split mouth. Logen caught the back of his head and jerked his knee up into Bethod's face, felt his nose crunch flat against it. Logen tangled his fingers in Bethod's hair, gripped it tight, pulled his head up high, and rammed it down into the stones.

'Die!' he hissed.

Bethod jerked, gurgled, Logen lifted his head and drove it down again, and again. The golden ring flew off his broken skull, bounced across the rooftop with a merry jingling.

'Die!'

Bone crunched, and blood shot out over the stone in fat drops and thin spatters. Pale-as-Snow and his Named Men stared, white-faced, helpless and fearful, horrified and delighted.

'Die, you fucker!'

And Logen hauled Bethod's ruined corpse into the air with one last effort and flung it tumbling over the battlements. He watched it fall. He watched it crunch to the ground and lie, on its side, arms and legs stuck out awkwardly, fingers curled as if they were grasping at something, the head no more than a dark smear on the hard earth. All the faces of the crowds of men standing below were turned towards that corpse, then slowly, eyes and mouths wide open, they lifted up to stare at Logen.

Crummock-i-Phail, standing in their midst, in the centre of the shaved circle beside the great body of the Feared, slowly raised his long arm, the fat forefinger on the end of it pointing upwards. 'The Bloody-Nine!' he screamed. 'King o' the Northmen!'

Logen gaped down at him, panting for breath, legs wobbling, trying to

understand. The fury was gone and left nothing but terrible tiredness behind it. Tiredness and pain.

‘King o’ the Northmen!’ someone shrieked, way back in the crowd.

‘No,’ croaked Logen, but no one heard him. They were all too drunk with blood and fury, or busy thinking what was easiest, or too scared to say any different. The chants broke out all over, first a trickle of them, then a flow, and then a flood, and all Logen could do was watch, clinging to the bloody stone and trying not to fall.

‘The Bloody-Nine! King o’ the Northmen!’

Pale-as-Snow was down on one knee beside him, spots of Bethod’s blood sprayed across the white fur on his coat. He always had been one to lick whatever arse was nearest, but he wasn’t alone. They were all kneeling, up on the walls and down on the grass. The Dogman’s Carls and Bethod’s. The men who’d held the shields for Logen and the ones who’d held the shields for the Feared. Maybe Bethod had taught them a lesson. Maybe they’d forgotten how to be their own men, and now they needed someone else to tell them what to do.

‘No,’ whispered Logen, but all that came out was a dull slurp. He had no more power to stop it than he had to make the sky fall in. Seemed to him then that men do pay for the things they’ve done, alright. But sometimes the payment isn’t what they expected.

‘The Bloody-Nine!’ roared Crummock again, as he sank down on his knees and lifted up his arms towards the sky, ‘King o’ the Northmen!’

Greater Good

The room was another over-bright box. It had the same off-white walls, spotted with brown stains. *Mould, or blood, or both.* The same battered table and chairs. *Virtually instruments of torture in themselves.* The same burning pains in Glokta's foot, and leg, and back. Some things never change. The same prisoner, as far as anyone could have told, with the same canvas bag over their head. *Just like the dozens who have been through this room over the past few days, and just like the dozens more crammed into the cells beyond the door, waiting on our pleasure.*

'Very well.' Glokta waved a tired hand, 'let us begin.'

Frost dragged the bag from the prisoner's head. A long, lean Kantic face with deep creases around the mouth and a neatly trimmed black beard, streaked with grey. A wise, dignified face, deep-set eyes even now adjusting to the glare.

Glokta burst out laughing. Each chuckle stabbed at the base of his stiff spine and rattled his stiff neck, but he could not help himself. *Even after all these years, fate can still play jokes on me.*

'Wath futhy?' grunted Frost.

Glokta wiped his runny eye. 'Practical Frost, we are truly honoured. Our latest prisoner is none other than Master Farrad, formerly of Yashtavit in Kanta, and more recently of a magnificent address at the top of the Kingsway. We are in the presence of the finest dentist in the Circle of the World.' *And one must appreciate the irony.*

Farrad blinked into the glaring lamplight. 'I know you.'

'Yes.'

'You are the one who was a prisoner of the Gurmish.'

'Yes.'

'The one they tortured. I remember . . . you were brought to me.'

'Yes.'

Farrad swallowed. *As though the memory alone is enough to make him vomit.* He glanced up at Frost and the pink eyes glowered back, unblinking. He glanced round the grubby, bloodstained room, at the cracked tiles, at the scarred table-top. His eyes lingered on the paper of confession lying upon it. 'After what they did to you – how can you do this, now?'

Glokta showed Farrad his toothless grin. 'After what they did to me, how could I do anything else?'

'Why am I here?'

'For the same reason as everyone else who comes here.' Glokta watched Frost plant the heavy tips of his fingers on the paper of confession and slide it deliberately across the table towards the prisoner. 'To confess.'

'Confess to what?'

'Why, to spying for the Gurmish.'

Farrad's face creased up with disbelief. 'I am no spy! The Gurkish took everything from me! I fled my home when they came! I am innocent, you must know this!'

Of course. As have been all the spies who confessed in this room over the last few days. But they all confessed, without exception. 'Will you sign the paper?'

'I have nothing to confess to!'

'Why is it that no one can answer the questions I ask?' Glokta stretched out his aching back, worked his creaking neck from side to side, rubbed at the bridge of his nose with finger and thumb. Nothing helped. *But then nothing ever does. Why must they always make it so very difficult, for me and for themselves?* 'Practical Frost, would you show the good master our work so far?'

The albino slid a dented tin bucket out from under the table and dumped the contents without ceremony in front of the prisoner. Teeth clattered, and slid, and spun across the wood. Hundreds of them. Teeth of all shapes and sizes, from white, through all the shades of yellow, to brown. Teeth with bloody roots and with shreds of flesh attached. A couple tumbled from the far end of the table and bounced from the grimy tiles, clicked away into the corners of the narrow room.

Farrad gaped down in horror at the bloody mess of dentistry before him. *And even the very Prince of Teeth can never have seen such a thing.* Glokta leaned forwards. 'I daresay you've pulled a tooth or two before yourself.' The prisoner nodded dumbly. 'Then you can probably imagine how tired I am after this lot. That's why I'd really like to be done with you as quickly as possible. I don't want you here, and you certainly don't want to be here. We can help each other.'

'What must I do?' muttered Farrad, his tongue moving nervously around his own mouth.

'It is not complicated. First you sign your confession.'

'Thorry,' mumbled Frost, leaning forward and brushing a couple of teeth off the document, one of them leaving a long, pink streak across the paper.

'Then you name two others.'

'Two other what?'

'Why, two other spies for the Gurkish, of course, from among your people.'

'But . . . I know no spies!'

'Then some other names will have to serve. You have been named already, several times.'

The dentist swallowed, then shook his head, and pushed the paper away. *A brave man, and a righteous one. But bravery and righteousness are bad virtues to have in this room.* 'I will sign. But I will not name innocent men. God have mercy on me, I will not.'

'God might have mercy on you. But he doesn't hold the pliers down here. Clamp him.'

Frost gripped Farrad's head from behind with one great white hand, tendons standing from the pale skin as he forced his mouth open. Then he shoved the clamp between Farrad's jaws and spun the nut round nimbly between finger and thumb until they were held wide open.

'Ah!' gurgled the dentist. 'Ayrh!'

'I know. And we're just getting started.' Glokta pushed back the lid of his

case, watched the polished wood, the sharpened steel, the shining glass spread outwards. *What the . . .* There was a disconcerting gap in the tools. 'For pity's sake! Have you had the pliers out of here, Frost?'

'Nuh,' grunted the albino, shaking his head angrily.

'Damn it! Can none of these bastards keep their own instruments? Go next door and see if we can borrow some, at least.'

The Practical lumbered from the room, the heavy door hanging ajar behind him. Glokta winced as he rubbed at his leg. Farrad stared at him, spit running from one corner of his forced-open mouth. His bulging eyes rolled sideways as a howl of pain came muffled from the corridor outside.

'I do apologise for this,' said Glokta. 'We're usually a great deal more organised, but it's been busy as hell here the last few days. Such a lot to get through, you see.'

Frost pulled the door shut and handed Glokta a pair of rusty pliers, handles first. There was some dry blood and a couple of curly hairs caked to the jaws.

'Is this the best they could do? These are dirty!'

Frost shrugged. 'Whath a ifferenth?'

A fair point, I suppose. Glokta gave a long sigh, struggled up from his chair and leaned forwards to peer into Farrad's mouth. *And a sweet set he has, too. A pearly white complement. I suppose you'd expect prize-winning teeth from a prize-winning dentist. Anything else would be a poor advertisement for his trade.*

'I applaud your cleanliness. It's a rare privilege to question a man who appreciates the importance of washing the mouth out. I can't say I've ever seen a better set of teeth.' Glokta tapped at them happily with the pliers. 'It seems a shame to tear them all out, just so that you can confess in ten minutes time instead of now, but there we are.' He closed the jaws around the nearest tooth, worked his hand around the handles.

'Gurlgh,' gurgled Farrad. 'Glaigh!'

Glokta pursed his lips, as though considering, then released the pliers. 'Let us give the good master one further chance to talk.' Frost unscrewed the clamp and pulled it from Farrad's mouth along with a string of drool. 'Is there something you wish to say?'

'I will sign!' gasped Farrad, a long tear running down one cheek. 'God help me, I will sign!'

'And you will name two accomplices?'

'Whatever you wish . . . please . . . whatever you wish.'

'Excellent,' said Glokta, as he watched the pen scratching against the paper of confession. 'Who's next?'

Glokta heard the lock behind him rattle. He scowled as he turned his head, preparing to scream at his presumptuous visitor.

'Your Eminence,' he whispered, with barely concealed dismay, grimacing as he struggled to get up from his chair.

'No need to rise, I do not have all day.' Glokta found himself frozen in the most painful possible position, bent somewhere between sitting and standing, and had to sag back into his chair with little grace as Sult swept into the room, three of his huge Practicals looming silently in the doorway behind him. 'You may ask your freak of nature to leave us.'

Frost's eyes narrowed, flickered over the other Practicals, then back to Sult.

'Very good, Practical Frost,' said Glokta hastily. 'You may remove our prisoner.'

The albino unlocked Farrad's manacles and dragged the dentist from his chair with one white fist, hauled him gasping by his collar to the door at the back of the room and ripped back the bolt with his free hand. He gave one pink glare over his shoulder and Sult glared back. Then he slammed the door behind him.

His Eminence slid into the chair opposite Glokta. *No doubt still warm from the sweating arse of the brave and righteous Master Farrad.* He brushed some of the teeth from the table-top before him with the side of one gloved hand and sent them clicking onto the floor. *And he could not have seemed to care less had they been breadcrumbs.* 'There is a deadly conspiracy afoot within the Agriont. Have we made progress in unmasking it?'

'I have interviewed most of the Kantic prisoners, extracted a suitable number of confessions, there should not be—'

Sult gave an angry wave of his hand. 'Not that, halfwit. I refer to that bastard Marovia and his pawns, the so-called First of the Magi and our so-called King.'

Even now, with the Gurkish knocking at the gates? 'Your Eminence, I had assumed the war would take precedence—'

'You have not the wit to assume,' sneered Sult. 'What evidence have you collected against Bayaz?'

I stumbled upon something I shouldn't have at the University, then was almost drowned in my bath. 'So far . . . nothing.'

'What of the parentage of King Jezal the First?'

'That avenue too appears . . . a dead end.' *Or an avenue with my own death at the end, if my owners at Valint and Balk were to hear of it. And they hear of everything.*

The Arch Lector's lips twisted. 'Then what the hell have you been doing lately?'

For the last three days I have been busy tearing meaningless confessions from the mouths of innocent men, so that we could appear effective. When was I supposed to find time to bring down the state, precisely? 'I have been occupied with seeking Gurkish spies—'

'Why do I never get anything from you but excuses? I have begun to wonder, since your effectiveness has so sharply declined, how you were able to keep Dagoska out of Gurkish hands so long. You must have needed a tremendous sum of money to strengthen the city's defences.'

It took all of Glokta's self-control to prevent his eye from twitching straight out of his head. *Still, now, you twitching jelly, or we are done.* 'The Guild of Spicers were persuaded to contribute when their own livelihoods were on the line.'

'How uncharacteristically generous of them. Now that I think of it, I find the whole business of Dagoska has a strange flavour. It has always struck me as odd that you chose to dispose of Magister Eider so privately, rather than sending her back to me.'

From very bad to an awful lot worse. 'A miscalculation on my part, your Eminence. I thought that I would spare you the trouble of—'

'Disposing of traitors is no trouble for me. You know that.' Angry creases spread out around Sult's hard blue eyes. 'Could it be, after all we have been through together, you might take me for a fool?'

Glokta's voice rasped uncomfortably in his dry throat. 'Absolutely not, Arch Lector.' *Merely a lethal megalomaniac. He knows. He knows that I am not entirely the dutiful slave. But how much does he know? And from whom did he learn it?*

'I gave you an impossible task, and so I have allowed you the benefit of the doubt. But your benefit will only last as long as your successes. I grow tired of putting the spur to you. If you do not solve my problems with our new King in the next two weeks, I will have Superior Goyle dig out the answers to my questions about Dagoska. I will have him dig them from your twisted flesh, if I must. Do I make myself clear?'

As Visserine glass. Two weeks to find the answers, or . . . fragments of a butchered corpse found floating by the docks. But if I even ask the questions, Valint and Balk will inform his Eminence of our arrangement and . . . bloated by seawater, horribly mutilated, far beyond recognition. Alas for poor Superior Glokta. A comely and a well-loved man, but such bad luck. Wherever will he turn?

'I understand, Arch Lector.'

'Then why ever are you still sitting here?'

It was Ardee West herself who opened the door, a half-full wine glass in one hand. 'Ah! Superior Glokta, what a delightful surprise. Do come in!'

'You sound almost pleased to see me.' *A rare response indeed to my arrival.*

'Why wouldn't I be?' She stepped gracefully aside to allow him past. 'How many girls are lucky enough to have a torturer for a chaperone? There's nothing like it for encouraging the suitors.'

He hobbled over the threshold. 'Where is your maid?'

'She got herself all worked up about some Gurkish army or other, so I let her go. Went to her mother in Martenhorm.'

'And you are yourself ready to leave, I hope?' He followed her into the warm living room, shutters and curtains closed, illuminated by the shifting glow from the coals on the fire.

'In fact, I have decided to stay in the city.'

'Really? The tragic princess, pining in her empty castle? Abandoned by her faithless servants, wringing her helpless hands while her enemies surround the moat?' Glokta snorted. 'Are you sure you fit the role?'

'Better than you fit that of the knight on the white charger, come to rescue the damsel with blade a-flashing.' She looked him scornfully up and down. 'I'd hoped for a hero with at least half his teeth.'

'I thought you'd be used to getting less than you hoped for by now.' *I know that I am.*

'What can I say? I'm a romantic. Have you come here only to puncture my dreams?'

'No. I do that without trying. I had in mind a drink and a conversation which did not include the subtext of my mutilated corpse.'

'It is hard to say at this stage what direction our conversation might take,

but the drink I can promise you.' She poured him a glass and he tossed it back in four long swallows. He held it out again, sucking his sweet gums.

'In all seriousness, the Gurmish are no more than a week from taking Adua under siege. You should leave as soon as possible.'

She filled his glass again, and then her own. 'Haven't you noticed that half the city has had the same idea? Such flea-bitten nags not requisitioned by the army are changing hands at five hundred marks a piece. Nervous citizens are pouring out to every corner of Midderland. Columns of defenceless refugees, wandering through a mass of mud at a mile a day as the weather turns cold, laden down with everything of value they possess, easy prey for every brigand within a hundred miles.'

'True,' Glokta had to admit as he wriggled his painful way into a chair near the fire.

'And where would I go to anyway? I swear I have not a single friend or relative anywhere in Midderland. Would you have me hide in the woods, lighting fires by rubbing sticks together and hunting down squirrels with my bare hands? How the hell would I stay drunk in those circumstances? No, thank you, I will be safer here, and considerably more comfortable. I have coal for the fire and the cellar is full to capacity. I can hold out for months.' She waved a floppy hand towards the wall. 'The Gurmish are coming from the west, and we are on the eastern side of town. I could not be safer in the palace itself, I daresay.'

Perhaps she is right. Here, at least, I can keep some kind of watch over her. 'Very well, I bow to your reasoning. Or I would, if my back allowed it.'

She settled herself opposite. 'And how is life in the corridors of power?'

'Chilly. As corridors often are.' Glokta stroked his lips with a finger. 'I find myself in a difficult situation.'

'I have some experience with those.'

'This one is . . . complicated.'

'Well then, in terms a dull wench like me might understand.'

Where's the harm? I stare death in the face already. 'In the terms of a dull wench, then, imagine this . . . desperately needing certain favours, you have promised your hand in marriage to two very rich and powerful men.'

'Huh. One would be a fine thing.'

'None would be a fine thing, in this particular case. They are both old and of surpassing ugliness.'

She shrugged. 'Ugliness is easily forgiven in the rich and powerful.'

'But both these suitors are prone to violent displays of jealousy. Dangerous displays, if your wanton faithlessness were to become common knowledge. You had hoped to extricate yourself from one promise or the other at some stage, but now the date of the weddings draws near, and you find that you are . . . still considerably entangled with both. More so than ever, in fact. Your response?'

She pursed her lips and took a long breath, considering it, then tossed a strand of hair theatrically over her shoulder. 'I would drive them both near madness with my matchless wit and smouldering beauty, then engineer a duel between the two. Whichever won would be rewarded with the ultimate prize of my hand in marriage, never suspecting I was once promised also to his

rival. Since he is old, I would earnestly hope for his imminent death, leaving me a wealthy and respected widow.' She grinned at him down her nose. 'What say you to that, sir?'

Glokta blinked. 'I fear the metaphor has lost its relevance.'

'Or . . .' Ardee squinted at the ceiling, then snapped her fingers. 'I might use my subtle feminine wiles . . .' thrusting back her shoulders and hitching up her bust, 'to entrap a third man, still more powerful and wealthy. Young, and handsome, and smooth of limb as well, I suppose, since this is a metaphor. I would marry him and with his help destroy those other two, and abandon them penniless and disappointed. Ha! What think you?'

Glokta felt his eyelid twitching, and he pressed one hand against it. *Interesting.* 'A third suitor,' he murmured. 'The idea had never even occurred.'

Skarling's Chair

Far below, the water frothed and surged. It had rained hard in the night, and now the river ran high with it, an angry flood chewing mindlessly at the base of the cliff. Cold black water and cold white spray against the cold black rock. Tiny shapes – golden yellow, burning orange, vivid purple, all the colours of fire, whisked and wandered with the mad currents, whatever way the rain washed them.

Leaves on the water, just like him.

And now it looked as if the rain would wash him south. To fight some more. To kill men who'd never heard of him. The idea of it made him want to be sick. But he'd given his word, and a man who doesn't keep his word isn't much of a man at all. That's what Logen's father used to tell him.

He'd spent a lot of long years not keeping to much of anything. His word, and the words of his father, and other men's lives, all meaning less than nothing. All the promises he'd made to his wife and to his children he'd let rot. He'd broken his word to his people, and his friends, and himself, more times than he could count. The Bloody-Nine. The most feared man in the North. A man who'd walked all his days in a circle of blood. A man who'd done nothing in all his life but evil. And all the while he'd looked at the sky and shrugged his shoulders. Blamed whoever was nearest, and told himself he'd had no choices.

Bethod was gone. Logen had vengeance, at last, but the world wasn't suddenly a better place. The world was the same, and so was he. He spread out the fingers of his left hand on the damp stone, bent and wonky from a dozen old breaks, knuckles scratched and scabbing, nails cracked and wedged under with dirt. He stared down at the familiar stump for a moment.

'Still alive,' he whispered, hardly able to believe it.

He winced at the pain in his battered ribs, groaned as he turned away from the window and back into the great hall. Bethod's throne room, and now his. The thought tugged a meagre belch of laughter out of his gut, but even that stabbed at the mass of stitches through his cheek and up the side of his face. He limped out across the wide floor, every step an ordeal. The sound of his scraping boots echoed in the high rafters, over the whispering of the river down below. Shafts of blurred light, heavy with floating dust, shone down and made criss-cross patterns across the boards. Near to Logen, on a raised-up dais, stood Skarling's Chair.

The hall, and the city, and the land around it had all changed far beyond recognition, but Logen reckoned the chair itself was much the same as it had been when Skarling lived. Skarling Hoodless, greatest hero of the North. The man who'd united the clans to fight against the Union, long ago. The man who'd drawn the North together with words and gestures, for a few brief years, at least.

A simple seat for a simple man – big, honest chunks of old wood, faded paint around the edges, polished smooth by Skarling's sons, and grandsons, and the men who'd led his clan since. Until the Bloody-Nine came knocking at the gates of Carleon. Until Bethod took the chair for his own, and pretended that he was all that Skarling had been, while he forced the North together with fire, and fear, and steel.

'Well then?' Logen jerked his head round, saw Black Dow leaning in the doorway, arms folded across his chest. 'Ain't you going to sit in it?'

Logen shook his head, even though his legs were aching so bad he could hardly bear to stand a moment longer. 'Mud always did for me to sit on. I'm no hero, and Skarling was no king.'

'Turned down a crown, as I heard it told.'

'Crowns.' Logen spat onto the straw, spit still pink from the cuts in his mouth. 'Kings. The whole notion's shit, and me the worst choice there could be.'

'You ain't saying no, though, eh?'

Logen frowned up at him. 'So some other bastard even worse'n Bethod can sit in that chair, make the North bleed some more? Maybe I can do some good with it.'

'Maybe.' Dow looked straight back. 'But some men aren't made for doing good.'

'You talking 'bout me again?' chuckled Crummock, striding in through the doorway, Dogman and Grim at his shoulder.

'Not all talk's about you, Crummock,' said Dogman. 'You sleep alright, Logen?'

'Aye,' he lied. 'Like the dead.'

'What now?'

Logen stared at that chair. 'South, I reckon.'

'South,' grunted Grim, giving no clue whether he thought it was a good idea or a bad.

Logen licked at the ragged flesh at the side of his mouth, checking again, for no reason that made any sense, just how much it hurt. 'Calder and Scale are still out there, somewhere. No doubt Bethod sent 'em to find some help. From out past the Crinna, or up in the high valleys, or wherever.'

Crummock chuckled softly. 'Ah, the good work's never done.'

'They'll be causing mischief sooner or later,' said Dogman, 'small doubt o' that.'

'Someone needs to stay back here and keep a watch on things. Hunt those two bastards out if they can.'

'I'll do it,' said Black Dow.

'You sure?'

Dow shrugged. 'I don't like boats and I don't like the Union. Don't need to take no voyage to work that out. And I've got scores enough to settle with Calder and Scale. I'll pick me some Carls out o' what's left, and I'll pay 'em a visit.' He flashed his nasty grin, and clapped Dogman on the arm. 'Good luck to the rest o' you down there with the Southerners, eh? Try not to get yourselves killed.' He narrowed his eyes at Logen. 'You especially, eh, Bloody-Nine? Wouldn't want to lose us another King o' the Northmen, now, would

we?’ And he sauntered out, arms folded.

‘How many men we got left over?’

‘Might be three hundred, now, if Dow takes a few.’

Logen gave a long sigh. ‘Best get ’em ready to leave then. Wouldn’t want Furious to go without us.’

‘Who’ll want to go?’ asked Dogman. ‘After what they been through these past months? Who’ll want more killing now?’

‘Men who don’t know how to do much else, I guess.’ Logen shrugged. ‘Bethod had gold down there, didn’t he?’

‘Aye, some.’

‘Then share it out. Plenty for each man comes with us. Some now, some when we get back. Reckon a good few’ll take the offer.’

‘Maybe. Men’ll talk hard for gold. Not sure they’ll fight hard for it, when the time comes.’

‘I reckon we’ll see.’

Dogman stared at him for a long moment. Stared him right in the eye. ‘Why?’

‘Because I gave my word.’

‘And? Never bothered you before, did it?’

‘Can’t say it did, and there’s the problem.’ Logen swallowed, and his mouth tasted bad. ‘What else can you do, but try and do better?’

Dogman nodded, slow, his eyes not leaving Logen’s face. ‘Right you are then, chief. South it is.’

‘Uh,’ said Grim, and the two of them walked out the doorway, leaving just Crummock behind.

‘Off to the Union for you is it, your Majesty? South and kill you some brown men in the sun?’

‘South.’ Logen worked one sore shoulder beside his sore neck, and then the other. ‘You coming?’

Crummock pushed himself away from the wall and walked forward, finger bones clicking round his thick neck. ‘No, no, no, not me. I’ve relished our time together, so I have, but everything’s got an end, don’t it. I’ve been away from my mountains for far too long, and my wives’ll be missing me.’ The chief of the hillmen held his arms out wide, took a step forward, and hugged Logen tight. A little too tight for comfort, if he was being honest.

‘They can have a king if they want one,’ whispered Crummock in his ear, ‘but I can’t say I do. Especially not the man who killed my son, eh?’ Logen felt himself go cold, from the roots of his hair to the tips of his fingers. ‘What did you think? That I wouldn’t know?’ The hillman leaned back to look Logen in the eye. ‘You slaughtered him before the whole world, now, didn’t you? You butchered little Rond like a sheep for the pot, and him just as helpless as one.’

They were alone in that wide hall, just the two of them, and the shadows, and Skarling’s chair. Logen winced as Crummock’s arms squeezed tighter, round the bruises and the wounds the Feared’s arms had left him. Logen hadn’t the strength left now to fight a cat, and they both knew it. The hillman could’ve crushed him flat, and finished the job the Feared had started. But he only smiled.

‘Don’t you worry, now, Bloody-Nine. I’ve got what I wanted, haven’t I?’

Bethod's dead and gone, and his Feared, and his witch, and his whole bastard notion of clans united, all back to the mud where they belong. With you in charge, I daresay it'll be a hundred years before folk in the North stop killing each other. Meantime maybe we up in the hills can have some peace, eh?'

'Course you can,' croaked Logen, through his gritted teeth, grimacing as Crummock pressed him even tighter.

'You killed my son, that's true, but I've got plenty more. You have to weed the weak ones out, don't you know? The weak and the unlucky. You don't put a wolf amongst your sheep then cry when you find one eaten, do you?'

Logen could only stare. 'You really are mad.'

'Maybe I am, but there's worse than me out there.' He leaned close again, soft breath in Logen's ear. 'I'm not the one killed the boy, am I?' He let Logen free, and he slapped him on the shoulder. The way a friend might, but there was no friendship in it. 'Don't ever come up in the High Places again, Ninefingers, that's my advice. I might not be able to give you another friendly reception.' He turned and walked away, slowly, waving one fat finger over his shoulder. 'Don't come up in the High Places again, Bloody-Nine! You're beloved o' the moon just a little too much for my taste!'

Leadership

Jezal clattered through the cobbled streets astride a magnificent grey, Bayaz and Marshal Varuz just behind him, a score of Knights of the Body, led by Bremer dan Gorst, following in full war gear. It was strangely unsettling to see the city, usually so brimful with humanity, close to deserted. Only a scattering of threadbare urchins, of nervous city watchmen, of suspicious commoners remained to hurry out of the way of the royal party as they passed. Most of those citizens who had stayed in Adua were well barricaded in their bedrooms, Jezal imagined. He would have been tempted to do the same, had Queen Terez not beaten him to it.

‘When did they arrive?’ Bayaz was demanding over the clatter of hooves.

‘The vanguard appeared before dawn,’ Jezal heard Varuz shout back. ‘And more Gurkish troops have been pouring in down the Keln road all morning. There were a few skirmishes in the districts beyond Casamir’s Wall, but nothing to slow them significantly. They are already halfway to encircling the city.’

Jezal jerked his head round. ‘Already?’

‘The Gurkish always liked to come prepared, your Majesty.’ The old soldier urged his horse up beside him. ‘They have started to construct a palisade around Adua, and have brought three great catapults with them. The same ones that proved so effective in their siege of Dagoska. By noon we will be entirely surrounded.’ Jezal swallowed. There was something about the word ‘surrounded’ that caused an uncomfortable tightening in his throat.

The column slowed to a stately walk as they approached the city’s westernmost gate. It was, in an irony that gave Jezal little pleasure, the very same gate through which he had entered the city in triumph before he was crowned High King of the Union. A crowd had gathered in the shadow of Casamir’s Wall, larger even than the one that had greeted him after his strange victory over the peasants. Today, however, there was hardly a mood of celebration. Smiling girls had been replaced by frowning men, fresh flowers with old weapons. Polearms stuck up above the press at all angles in an unruly forest, points and edges glinting. Pikes and pitch forks, bill hooks and boat hooks, brooms with the twigs removed and knives nailed in their places.

There was a smattering of King’s Own padded out by some squinting members of the city watch, a few puffed-up tradesmen with leather jerkins and polished swords, some slouching labourers with antique flatbows and tough expressions. These were the very best of what was on offer. They were accompanied by a random assortment of citizens of both sexes and all ages, equipped with a bewildering range of mismatched armour and weapons. Or nothing at all. It was difficult to tell who was supposed to be a soldier and who a citizen, if, indeed, there was still a difference. Every one of them was looking at Jezal as he smartly dismounted, his golden spurs jingling. Looking

to him, he realised, as he began to walk out among them, his well-armoured bodyguard clanking behind.

'These are the defenders of this borough?' murmured Jezal to Lord Marshal Varuz, following at his shoulder.

'Some of them, your Majesty. Accompanied by some enthusiastic townsfolk. A touching spectacle.'

Jezal would happily have traded a touching crowd for an effective one, but he supposed a leader had always to appear indomitable before his followers. Bayaz had told him so often. How doubly, how triply true of a king before his subjects? Especially a king whose grip on his recently won crown might be thought of as slippery at best.

So he stood tall, pointed his scarred chin as high as he dared, flicked out his gilt-edged cloak with one gauntleted hand. He strode through the crowd with the confident swagger he had always used to have, one hand resting on the jewelled pommel of his sword, hoping with every step that no one caught an inkling of the cauldron of fear and doubt behind his eyes. The crowd muttered as he swept past, Varuz and Bayaz hurrying behind. Some made attempts at bows, others did not bother.

'The king!'

'I thought he'd be taller . . .'

'Jezal the Bastard.' Jezal snapped his head round, but there was no way of telling who spoke.

'That's Luthar!'

'A cheer for 'is Majesty!' Followed by a half-hearted murmur.

'This way,' said a pale-looking officer before the gate, indicating a staircase with one apologetic hand. Jezal climbed manfully, two stone steps at a time, spurs jingling. He came out onto the roof of the gatehouse and froze, his lip curling with distaste. Who should be standing there but his old friend Superior Gloкта, bent over on his cane, his repulsive toothless smile on his face?

'Your Majesty,' he leered, voice heavy with irony. 'What an almost overwhelming honour.' He lifted his cane to point towards the far parapet. 'The Gurkish are that way.'

Jezal was attempting to frame a suitably acidic reply as his eyes followed Gloкта's stick. He blinked, the muscles of his face going slack. He stepped past the cripple without saying a word. His scarred jaw crept gradually open, and stayed there.

'The enemy,' growled Varuz. Jezal tried to imagine what Logen Ninefingers would have said faced with the sight below him now.

'Shit.'

In the patchwork of damp fields, over the roads and through the hedgerows, between the farms and villages and the few coppices of old trees beyond the city walls, Gurkish troops swarmed in their thousands. The wide paved road towards Keln, curving away southwards through the flat farmland, was a single crawling, glittering, heaving river of marching men. Gurkish soldiers, in column, flooding up and flowing smoothly out to encircle the city in a giant ring of men, wood, and steel. Tall standards stood out above the boiling throng, golden symbols flashing in the watery autumn sunlight. The standards of the Emperor's legions. Jezal counted ten at his first glance.

‘A considerable body of men,’ said Bayaz, with awesome understatement.

Glokta grinned. ‘The Gurmish hate to travel alone.’

The fence that Marshal Varuz had referred to earlier was already rising, a dark line winding through the muddy fields a few hundred strides from the walls, a shallow ditch in front of it. More than adequate to prevent supplies or reinforcements reaching the city from outside. Further away several camps were taking shape: vast bodies of white tents erected in neatly ordered squares, several with tall columns of dark smoke already floating up into the white sky from cook-fires and forges. There was a deeply worrying feeling of permanence about the whole arrangement. Adua might still have been in Union hands, but even the most patriotic liar could not have denied that the city’s hinterland already belonged firmly to the Emperor of Gurmishul.

‘You have to admire their organisation,’ said Varuz grimly.

‘Yes . . . their organisation . . .’ Jezal’s voice was suddenly creaky as old floorboards. Putting a brave face on this seemed more like insanity than courage.

A dozen horsemen had detached themselves from the Gurmish lines and now rode forward at a steady trot. Two long flags streamed above their heads, red and yellow silk, worked with Kantic characters in golden thread. There was a white flag too, so small as to be barely noticeable.

‘Parleys,’ growled the First of the Magi, slowly shaking his head. ‘What are they but an excuse for old fools who love to hear their own voices to prattle about fair treatment before they start on the butchery?’

‘I suppose on the subject of old fools who love to hear their own voices, you are the absolute expert.’ That was what Jezal thought but he kept it to himself, watching the Gurmish party approach in brooding silence. A tall man came at their head, gold shining on his sharply pointed helmet and his polished armour, riding with that upright arrogance that shouts, even from a distance, of high command.

Marshal Varuz frowned. ‘General Malzagurt.’

‘You know him?’

‘He commanded the Emperor’s forces, during the last war. We grappled with each other for months. We parleyed more than once. A most cunning opponent.’

‘You got the better of him though, eh?’

‘In the end, your Majesty.’ Varuz looked far from happy. ‘But I had an army then.’

The Gurmish commander clattered up the road, through the jumble of deserted buildings scattered beyond Casamir’s wall. He reined in his horse before the gate, staring proudly upwards, one hand resting casually on his hip.

‘I am General Malzagurt,’ he called in a sharp Kantic accent, ‘the chosen representative of his magnificence, Uthman-ul-Dosht, Emperor of Gurmishul.’

‘I am King Jezal the First.’

‘Of course. The bastard.’

It was pointless to deny it. ‘That’s right. The bastard. Why don’t you come in, General? Then we can speak face to face, like civilised men.’

Malzagurt’s eyes flickered across to Glokta. ‘Forgive me, but the response of your government to unarmed emissaries of the Emperor has not always been .

. . civilised. I think I will remain outside the walls. For now.'

'As you wish. I believe you are already acquainted with Lord Marshal Varuz?'

'Of course. It seems an age since we tussled in the dry wastelands. I would say that I have missed you . . . but I have not. How are you, my old friend, my old enemy?'

'Well enough,' grunted Varuz.

Malzagurt gestured towards the vast array of manpower deploying behind him. 'Under the circumstances, eh? I do not know your other—'

'He is Bayaz. First of the Magi.' A smooth, even voice. It came from one of Malzagurt's companions. A man dressed all in simple white, somewhat in the manner of a priest. He seemed hardly older than Jezal, and very handsome, with a dark face, perfectly smooth. He wore no armour, carried no weapon. There was no adornment on his clothes or his simple saddle. And yet the others in the party, even Malzagurt himself, seemed to look at him with great respect. With fear, almost.

'Ah.' The General peered up, stroking thoughtfully at his short grey beard. 'So this is Bayaz.'

The young man nodded. 'This is he. It has been a long time.'

'Not long enough, Mamun, you damned snake!' Bayaz clung to the parapet, teeth bared. The old Magus was so good at playing the kindly uncle that Jezal had forgotten how terrifying his sudden fury could be. He took a shocked step away, half raising a hand to shield his face. The Gurkish aides and flag-carriers cringed, one going so far as to be noisily sick. Even Malzagurt lost a sizeable chunk of his heroic bearing.

But Mamun gazed up just as levelly as before. 'Some among my brothers thought that you would run, but I knew better. Khalul always said your pride would be the end of you, and here is the proof. It seems strange to me, now, that I once thought you a great man. You look old, Bayaz. You have dwindled.'

'Things seem smaller when they are far above you!' growled the First of the Magi. He ground the toe of his staff into the stones under his feet, his voice carrying now a terrible menace. 'Come closer, Eater, and you can judge my weakness while you burn!'

'The time was you could have crushed me with a word, I do not doubt it. But now your words are only empty air. Your power has leaked away with the slow years, while mine has never been greater. I have a hundred brothers and sisters behind me. What allies have you, Bayaz?' He swept the battlements with a mocking smile. 'Only such as you deserve.'

'I may yet find allies to surprise you.'

'I doubt it. Long ago, Khalul told me what your final, desperate hope would be. Time proved him right, as it always has. So you went to the very edge of the World, chasing shadows. Dark shadows indeed, for one who calls himself righteous. I know that you failed.' The priest showed two rows of perfect white teeth. 'The Seed passed out of history, long ago. Interred, dark leagues beneath the earth. Sunk, far below the bottomless ocean. Your hopes are sunk with it. You have only one choice left to you. Will you come with us willingly, and be judged by Khalul for your betrayal? Or must we come in and take

you?’

‘You dare to speak to me of betrayal? You who betrayed the highest principals of our order, and broke the sacred law of Euz? How many have you murdered, so that you could be powerful?’

Mamun only shrugged. ‘Very many. I am not proud. You left us a choice of dark paths, Bayaz, and we made the sacrifices we had to. There is no purpose in our arguing over the past. After these long centuries, standing on opposite sides of a great divide, I think neither one of us will convince the other. The victors can decide who was right, just as they always have, since long before the Old Time. I know your answer already, but the Prophet would have me ask the question. Will you come to Sarkant, and answer for your great crimes? Will you be judged by Khalul?’

‘Judged?’ snarled Bayaz. ‘He will judge me, the swollen-headed old murderer?’ He barked harsh laughter down from the walls. ‘Come and take me if you dare, Mamun, I will be waiting!’

‘Then we will come,’ murmured Khalul’s first apprentice, frowning up from under his fine black brows. ‘We have been preparing long years to do it.’

The two men fell to sullen glaring, and Jezal frowned with them. He resented the sudden feeling that the whole business was somehow an argument between Bayaz and this priest and that he, although a king, was like a child eavesdropping on his parents’ conversation, and with just as little say in the outcome.

‘Speak your terms, General!’ he bellowed down.

Malzagurt cleared his throat. ‘Firstly, if you surrender the city of Adua to the Emperor, he is prepared to allow you to retain your throne, as his subject, of course, paying regular tribute.’

‘How generous of him. What of the traitor, Lord Brock? We understood that you have promised him the crown of the Union.’

‘We are not altogether committed to Lord Brock. He does not hold the city, after all. You do.’

‘And we have scant respect for those who turn on their own masters,’ added Mamun, with a dark look up at Bayaz.

‘Secondly, the citizens of the Union will be permitted to continue to live according to their own laws and customs. They will continue to live in freedom. Or as close to it as they have ever really been, at least.’

‘Your generosity is astonishing.’ Jezal had meant to sneer it, but in the end it escaped without much irony.

‘Thirdly,’ shouted the General, with a nervous glance sideways towards Mamun, ‘the man known as Bayaz, the First of the Magi, be delivered over to us, bound and in chains, that he may be conveyed to the Temple of Sarkant, for judgement by the Prophet Khalul. Those are our terms. Refuse them, and the Emperor has decreed that Midderland shall be treated as any other conquered province. Many will be killed, and many more made slaves, Gurkish governors will be installed, your Agriont will be made a temple, and your current rulers . . . conveyed to cells beneath the Emperor’s palace.’

Jezal half opened his mouth to refuse on an instinct. Then he paused. Harod the Great, no doubt, would have spat his defiance at any odds, and probably pissed on the emissary to boot. The slightest notion of negotiating with the

Gurkish was against every long-held belief he possessed.

But, thinking about it, the terms were far more generous than he had ever expected. Jezal would probably have enjoyed more authority as a subject of Uthman-ul-Dosht than he did with Bayaz staring over his shoulder every moment of every day. He could save lives by saying a word. Real lives, of real people. He reached up and rubbed gently at his scarred lips with a fingertip. He had experienced enough suffering on the endless plains of the Old Empire to think long and hard about risking so much pain to so many, and himself in particular. The notion of cells beneath the Emperor's palace caused him some pause.

It was bizarre that such a vital decision should fall to him. A man who, no more than a year ago, had proudly confessed to knowing nothing about anything, and caring still less. But then Jezal was beginning to doubt that anyone in a position of high authority ever really knew what they were doing. The best one could hope for was to maintain some shred of an illusion that one might. And occasionally, perhaps, try to give the mindless flood of events the slightest push in one direction or another, hoping desperately that it would turn out to be the right one.

But what was the right one?

'Give me your answer!' shouted Malzagurt. 'I have preparations to make!'

Jezal frowned. He was sick of being dictated to by Bayaz, but at least the old bastard had played some role in his ascension to the throne. He was sick of being slighted by Terez, but at least she was his wife. Quite aside from any other consideration, his patience was stretched very thin. He simply refused to be ordered around at sword-point by some posturing Gurkish General and his damn fool priest.

'I reject your terms!' he called airily down from the walls. 'I reject them utterly and completely. I am not in the habit of surrendering my advisers, or my cities, or my sovereignty simply when asked. Particularly not to a pack of Gurkish curs with small manners and even smaller wits. You are not in Gurkhul now, General, and here your arrogance becomes you even less than that absurd helmet. I suspect that you will learn a harsh lesson before you leave these shores. Might I add, before you scuttle off, that I encourage you and your priest to fuck each other? Who knows? Perhaps you could persuade the great Uthman-ul-Dosht – and the all-knowing Prophet Khalul too for that matter – to join you!'

General Malzagurt frowned. He conferred quickly with an aide, evidently having not entirely understood the finer points of that last utterance. Once he had finally taken them in he gave an angry slash of his dark hand and barked an order in Kantic. Jezal saw men moving among the buildings scattered outside the walls, torches in their hands. The Gurkish General took one last look up at the gatehouse. 'Damn pinks!' he snarled. 'Animals!' And he tore at the reins of his horse and sprang away, his officers clattering after him.

The priest Mamun sat there a moment longer, a sadness on his perfect face. 'So be it. We will put on our armour. May God forgive you, Bayaz.'

'You need forgiveness more than I, Mamun! Pray for yourself!'

'So I do. Every day. But I have seen no sign in all my long life that God is the forgiving kind.' Mamun turned his horse away from the gates and rode

slowly back towards the Gurkish lines, through the abandoned buildings, flames already licking hungrily at their walls.

Jezal took a long, ragged breath as his eyes flicked up to the mass of men moving through the fields. Damn his mouth, it got him in all kinds of trouble. But it was a little late now for second thoughts. He felt Bayaz' fatherly touch on his shoulder, that steering touch that had become so very annoying to him over the past few weeks. He had to grit his teeth to keep from shaking free.

'You should address your people,' said the Magus.

'What?'

'The right words could make all the difference. Harod the Great could speak at a moment's notice. Did I tell you of the time he—'

'Very well!' snapped Jezal, 'I am going.'

He walked towards the opposite parapet with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man to his scaffold. The crowd was spread out below in all its disturbing variety. Jezal had to stop himself fussing with his belt-buckle. He kept worrying for some reason that his trousers would fall down in front of all those people. A ridiculous notion. He cleared his throat. Someone saw him, pointed.

'The king!'

'King Jezal!'

'The king speaks!'

The crowd shifted and stretched, drawn towards the gatehouse, a sea of hopeful, fearful, needy faces. The noise in the square slowly died and a breathless silence fell.

'My friends . . . my countrymen . . . my subjects!' His voice rang out with pleasing authority. A good beginning, very . . . rhetorical. 'Our enemies may be many . . . very many . . .' Jezal cursed to himself. That was hardly an admission to give courage to the masses. 'But I urge you to take heart! Our defences are strong!' He slapped at the firm stones under his hand. 'Our courage is indomitable!' He thumped at his polished breastplate. 'We will hold firm!' This was better! He had discovered a natural talent for speaking. The crowd was warming to him now, he could feel it. 'We need not hold out forever! Lord Marshal West is even now bringing his army to our assistance—'

'When?' someone screamed out. There was a wave of angry muttering.

'Er . . .' Jezal, wrong-footed, glanced nervously across at Bayaz, 'er . . .'

'When will they come? When?' The First of the Magi hissed at Glokta, and the cripple made a sharp gesture to someone below.

'Soon! You may depend upon it!' Curse Bayaz, this had been an awful notion. Jezal did not have the ghost of an idea of how to put heart into a rabble.

'What about our children? What about our homes? Will your house burn? Will it?' A swell of unhappy calls went up.

'Do not fear! I beg of you . . . please . . .' Damn it! He had no business pleading, he was a king. 'The army is on its way!' Jezal noticed black figures forcing through the press. Practicals of the Inquisition. They converged, somewhat to his relief, on the point where the heckles were coming from. 'They are even now leaving the North! Any day they will come to our aid, and teach these Gurkish dogs a—'

‘When? When will—’ Black sticks rose and fell in the midst of the crowd and the question was cut off in a high-pitched shriek.

Jezal did his best to shout over it. ‘In the meantime, will we let these Gurkish scum ride free over our fields? Over the fields of our fathers?’

‘No!’ someone roared, to Jezal’s great relief.

‘No! We will show these Kantic slaves how a free Union citizen can fight!’ A volley of lukewarm agreements. ‘We will fight as bravely as lions! As fiercely as tigers!’ He was warming to his work, now, the words were spilling out as if he really meant them. Perhaps he did. ‘We will fight as we did in the days of Harod! Of Arnault! Of Casamir!’ A rousing cheer went up. ‘We will not rest until these Gurkish devils are driven back across the Circle Sea! There will be no negotiation!’

‘No negotiation!’ someone called.

‘Damn the Gurkish!’

‘We will never surrender!’ Jezal bellowed, striking the parapet with his fist. ‘We will fight for every street! For every house! For every room!’

‘For every house!’ someone squealed with rabid excitement, and the citizens of Adua bellowed their approval.

Feeling the moment upon him, Jezal slid his sword from its sheath with a suitably warlike ringing and held it high above his head. ‘And I will be proud to draw my sword beside you! We will fight for each other! We will fight for the Union! Every man . . . every woman . . . a hero!’

There was a deafening cheer. Jezal waved his sword and a glittering wave surged out among the spears as they were shaken in the air, thumped against armoured chests, hammered down against the stone. Jezal smiled wide. The people loved him, and were more than willing to fight for him. Together they would be victorious, he felt it. He had made the right decision.

‘Nicely done,’ murmured Bayaz in his ear. ‘Nicely—’ Jezal’s patience was worn out. He rounded on the Magus with his teeth bared. ‘I know how it was done! I have no need of your constant—’

‘Your Majesty.’ It was Gorst’s piping voice.

‘How dare you interrupt me? What the hell is—’

Jezal’s tirade was cut off by a ruddy glare at the corner of his eye, followed a moment later by a roaring detonation. He jerked his head round to see flames springing up above the jumble of roofs some distance away on his right. Below in the square there was a collective gasp, a wave of nervous movement through the crowd.

‘The Gurkish bombardment has begun,’ said Varuz.

A streak of fire shot up into the white sky above the Gurkish lines. Jezal watched it open-mouthed as it plummeted down towards the city. It crashed into the buildings, this time on Jezal’s left, bright fire shooting high into the air. The terrifying boom assaulted his ears an instant afterward.

Shouts came from below. Orders, perhaps, or screams of panic. The crowd began to move in every direction at once. People rushed for the walls, or for their homes, or nowhere in particular, a chaotic tangle of pressing bodies and waving polearms.

‘Water!’ someone shouted.

‘Fire!’

‘Your Majesty.’ Gorst was already leading Jezal back towards the stairway. ‘You should return to the Agriont at once.’

Jezal started at another thunderous explosion, this one even closer. Smoke was already rising in oily smudges over the city. ‘Yes,’ he muttered, allowing himself to be led to safety. He realised that he still had his sword drawn, and sheathed it somewhat guiltily. ‘Yes of course.’

Fearlessness, as Logen Ninefingers had once observed, is a fool’s boast.

A Rock and a Hard Place

Glokta shook with laughter, wheezing gurgles slobbering through his empty gums, the hard chair creaking under his bony arse. His coughs and his whimpers echoed dully from the bare walls of his dim living room. In a way, it sounded very much like weeping. *And perhaps it is, just a little.*

Every shake of his twisted shoulders drove nails into his neck. Every jerk of his rib-cage sent flashes of pain down to the very tips of such toes as he had left. He laughed, and the laughter hurt, and the pain made him laugh all the more. *Oh, the irony! I titter with hopelessness. I chuckle with despair.*

Bubbles of spit blew from his lips as he gave one last long whine. *Like a sheep's death rattle, but less dignified.* Then he swallowed, and wiped his running eyes. *I have not laughed so hard in years. Since before the Emperor's torturers did their work, I shouldn't wonder. And yet it is not so very difficult to stop. After all, nothing is really very funny here, is it?* He lifted the letter, and read it again.

Superior Glokta,

My employers at the banking house of Valint and Balk are more than disappointed with your progress. It is some time now since I asked you, in person, to inform us of Arch Lector Sult's plans. In particular, the reasons for his continuing interest in the University. Since then we have received no communication from you.

It may be that you believe the sudden arrival of the Gurkish beyond the city walls has altered the expectations of my employers.

It has not, in any way whatsoever. Nothing will.

You will report to us within the week, or his Eminence will be informed of your divided loyalties.

I need hardly add that it would be wise for you to destroy this letter.

Mauthis.

Glokta stared at the paper for a long while by the light of the single candle, his ruined mouth hanging open. *For this, I lived through months of agony in the darkness of the Emperor's prisons? Tortured my savage way through the Guild of Mercers? Slaughtered my bloody path through the city of Dagoska? To end my days in ignominy, trapped between a bitter old bureaucrat and a bankfull of treacherous swindlers? All my twisting, my lying, my bargains, and my pain. All those corpses left beside the road . . . for this?*

A new wave of laughter rocked his body, twisted him up and made his aching back rattle. *His Eminence and these bankers deserve each other! Even with the city burning down around them, their games cannot stop for an instant. Games which may very well prove fatal to poor Superior Glokta, who only tried to do his crippled best.* He had to wipe a little snot from under his nose he laughed so hard at that last thought.

It almost seems a shame to burn such a horribly hilarious document. Perhaps I

should take it to the Arch Lector instead? Would he see the funny side, I wonder? Would we chuckle over it together? He reached out and held the corner of the letter to the twisting candle flame, watched fire flicker up the side, creep out through the writing, white paper curling up into black ashes.

Burn, as my hopes, and my dreams, and my glorious future burned beneath the Emperor's palace! Burn, as Dagoska did and Adua surely will before the Emperor's fury! Burn, as I would love to burn King Jezal the Bastard, and the First of the Magi, and Arch Lector Sult, and Valint and Balk, and the whole damned—

'Gah!' Gloкта flailed his singed fingertips in the air then stuck them in his toothless mouth, his laughter quickly cut off. *Strange. However much pain we experience, we never become used to it. We always scramble to escape it. We never become resigned to more.* The corner of the letter was still smouldering on the floor. He frowned, and ground it out with a savage poke of his cane.

The air was heavy with the sharp tang of wood smoke. *Like a hundred thousand burnt dinners.* Even here in the Agriont, there was the slightest grey haze of it, a messy blending together of the buildings at the end of each street. Fires had been raging in the outer districts for several days now, and the Gurkish bombardment had not let up a hair, night or day. Even as Gloкта walked, the breath wheezing through the gaps in his teeth with the effort of putting one foot in front of the other, there came the muffled boom of an incendiary landing somewhere in the city, the tiniest murmur of vibration through the soles of his boots.

The people in the lane froze, staring up in alarm. *Those few unlucky folk who found themselves without excuses to flee the city when the Gurkish came. Those unlucky folk who were too important, or not important enough. An optimistic handful who thought the Gurkish siege would be another passing fad – like a rain storm or short trousers. Too late they discover their grave error.*

Gloкта kept hobbling, head lowered. He had not lost a wink of sleep for the explosions rocking the city in the darkness the past week. *I was too busy losing sleep for my mind spinning round and round like a cat in a sack, trying to find some way clear of this trap. I became well-used to explosions during my holiday in charming Dagoska.* For him, the pain lancing through his arse and up his spine was considerably more worrisome.

Oh, arrogance! Who would ever have dared suggest that Gurkish boots would one day trample across the fertile fields of Miederland? That the pretty farms and sleepy villages of the Union would dance with Gurkish fire? Who could ever have expected that beautiful, thriving Adua would turn from a little piece of heaven into a little piece of hell? Gloкта felt himself smiling. Welcome, everyone! Welcome! I've been here all along. How nice of you to join me.

He heard armoured boots tramping down the road behind him, shuffled too late out of the way of a hurrying column of soldiers and was barged roughly onto the grassy verge, left foot sliding in the mud and sending a stab of agony up his leg. The column clattered past, heedless, and Gloкта grimaced after them. *People no longer have the proper level of fear for the Inquisition. They are all a great deal too afraid of the Gurkish for that.* He stepped away from the wall

with a wince and a curse, stretched his neck out and carried on limping.

High Justice Marovia was framed in the largest window of his echoing office, hands clasped behind his back. His windows faced west. *The direction of the main Gurmish assault.* Above the rooftops in the distance, columns of dark smoke rose into the pale sky, blending together into a gritty pall that rendered the autumn half-light still more funereal. Marovia turned when he heard Glokta's toeless foot creaking on the dark boards, his lined old face alive with a welcoming smile.

'Ah, Superior Glokta! You cannot imagine my delight to hear you announced! I have missed you since your last visit. I do so enjoy your . . . forthright style. I do so admire your . . . commitment to your work.' He flapped one lazy hand towards the window. 'The law, I must admit, tends to be sleepy in times of war. But even with the Gurmish at the gates the noble business of his Majesty's Inquisition continues, eh? I assume you have come once again on behalf of his Eminence?'

Glokta paused. *But only out of habit. I must turn my twisted back on the Inquisition. What would Sult call me? A traitor? No doubt, and worse besides. But every man's first loyalty must be to himself. I have made my sacrifices.* 'No, your Worship. I have come on behalf of Sand dan Glokta.' He limped up to a chair, slid it out and dumped himself into it without being asked. *I am far past the niceties, now.* 'Frankly, I need your help.' *Frankly, you are my last hope.*

'My help? Surely you are not without powerful friends of your own?'

'It is my regrettable experience that powerful men can afford no friends.'

'All too unfortunately true. You do not reach my position, or even yours, without understanding that each man stands alone, in the end.' Marovia gazed down beneficently as he settled into his own tall chair. *Though I am far from put at ease. His smiles are every bit as deadly as Sult's frowns, I think.* 'Our friends must be those that can make themselves useful to us. With that in mind, what help can I offer you? And more importantly, what can you offer me in return?'

'That may take some explaining.' Glokta winced at a cramp in his leg and forced it out straight under the table. 'May I speak entirely honestly with you, your Worship?'

Marovia stroked thoughtfully at his beard. 'The truth is a very rare and valuable commodity. I am astonished that a man of your experience would simply give it away. Especially to someone on the other side of the fence, so to speak.'

'I was once told that a man lost in the desert must take such water as he is offered, regardless of the source.'

'Lost, are you? Speak honestly, then, Superior, and we will see if I can spare something from my canteen.'

Hardly a promise of succour, but the best I might have hoped for from a man so recently a bitter enemy. And so . . . my confession. Glokta turned over the memories of the last couple of years in his mind. *And a filthy, a shameful, an ugly set they are. Where to begin?* 'It is some time ago, now, that I began to examine irregularities in the business of the Honourable Guild of Mercers.'

'I well remember the unfortunate affair.'

'During my investigations I discovered that the Mercers were financed by a bank. A very wealthy and powerful bank. Valint and Balk.'

Glokta watched carefully for a reaction, but Marovia's eyes did not so much as flicker. 'I am aware of the existence of such an institution.'

'I suspected that they were implicated in the Mercers' crimes. Magister Kault told me as much before his unfortunate demise. But his Eminence did not wish me to investigate further. Too many complications at a complicated time.' Glokta's left eye twitched and he felt it beginning to run. 'My apologies,' he muttered as he wiped it with a finger. 'Shortly afterwards I was dispatched to Dagoska, to take charge of the defence of the city.'

'Your particular diligence in that matter was a source of some discomfort to me.' Marovia worked his mouth sourly. 'My congratulations. You did an extraordinary job.'

'I cannot entirely take the credit. The task the Arch Lector had given me was impossible. Dagoska was riddled with treason and surrounded by the Gurkish.'

Marovia snorted. 'One sympathises.'

'If only anyone had sympathised then, but they were busy here, trying to get the better of each other, as they always are. Dagoska's defences were in a state entirely inadequate for the task. I could not strengthen them without money —'

'His Eminence was not forthcoming.'

'His Eminence would not part with a single mark. But an unlikely benefactor stepped forward in my time of need.'

'A rich uncle? What a happy chance.'

'Not entirely.' Glokta licked at the salty space where his front teeth had once been. *And the secrets begin to spill like turds from a draining latrine-pit.* 'My rich uncle was none other than the banking house of Valint and Balk.'

Marovia frowned. 'They advanced you money?'

'It was thanks to their generosity that I was able to keep the Gurkish out as long as I did.'

'Bearing in mind that powerful people have no friends, what did Valint and Balk get in return?'

'In essence?' Glokta gave the High Justice an even stare. 'Whatever they wanted. Shortly after returning from Dagoska I was investigating the death of Crown Prince Raynault.'

'A terrible crime.'

'Of which the Gurkish ambassador who hung for it was innocent.'

Marovia registered the tiniest hint of surprise. 'You say so?'

'Undoubtedly. But the death of the heir to the throne created other problems, problems relating to votes in the Open Council, and his Eminence was happy with the easy answer. I tried to pursue the matter, but was prevented. By Valint and Balk.'

'You suspect that these bankers were involved in the death of the Crown Prince, then?'

'I suspect them of all manner of things, but proof is in short supply.' *Always too many suspicions, and not enough proof.*

'Banks,' grunted Marovia. 'They are made of air. They spin money out of

guesses, and lies, and promises. Secrets are their currency, even more than gold.'

'So I have discovered. But men lost in the desert—'

'Yes, yes! Please continue.'

Glokta found, to his surprise, that he was greatly enjoying himself. He was almost tripping over his own tongue in his eagerness to blurt it all out. *Now I begin throwing away the secrets I have hoarded for so long, I find I cannot stop. I feel like a miser on a spending spree. Horrified, yet liberated. Agonised, yet delighted. Something like cutting your own throat, I imagine – a glorious release, but one you can enjoy only once. And like cutting my own throat, it will very likely end in my ugly death. Ah well. It has been coming some time, has it not? And not even I could claim I don't deserve it ten times over.*

Glokta leaned forwards. *Even here, even now, I somehow need to speak it softly.* 'Arch Lector Sult is not happy with our new king. Most particularly, he is not happy with the influence that Bayaz exerts over him. Sult finds his powers much curtailed. He believes, in fact, that you are somehow behind the whole business.'

Marovia frowned. 'Does he now?'

He does, and I am not entirely sure that I discount the possibility. 'He has asked me to find some means of removing Bayaz . . .' His voice dropped almost to a whisper. 'Or removing the king. I suspect, should I fail, that he has other plans. Plans which somehow involve the University.'

'You would seem to be accusing his Eminence the Arch Lector of high treason against the state.' Marovia's eyes were bright and hard as a pair of new nails. *Suspicious, and yet terribly eager.* 'Have you uncovered anything to use against the king?'

'Before I could even consider doing so, Valint and Balk quite forcibly dissuaded me.'

'They knew so quickly?'

'I am forced to concede that someone close to me may not be as reliable as I have always hoped. The bankers not only demanded that I disobey his Eminence, they also insisted that I investigate him. They want to know his plans. I have only a few days to satisfy them, and Sult no longer trusts me enough to share the contents of his latrine with me, let alone the contents of his mind.'

'Oh dear, dear.' Marovia slowly shook his head. 'Oh dear, dear.'

'To add to my woes, I believe that the Arch Lector is considerably less ignorant of what occurred in Dagoska than he at first appeared. If somebody is talking, it may well be that they are talking to both sides.' *If you can betray a man once, after all, it is not so very difficult to do it twice.* Glokta gave a long sigh. *And there we are. The secrets are all spilled. The turd-pit is emptied. My throat is slashed from ear to ear.* 'That is the whole story, your Worship.'

'Well, Superior, you certainly find yourself in quite a pickle.' *Quite a fatal one, in fact.* Marovia got up and wandered slowly around the room. 'Let us suppose, for the moment, that you truly have come for my help, and not to lead me into some manner of embarrassment. Arch Lector Sult has the means to cause a most serious problem. And the towering self-obsession necessary to try it at a time like this.' *You'll get no argument from me there.* 'If you could

obtain compelling evidence, I would, of course, be willing to present it to the king. But I cannot move against a member of the Closed Council, and the Arch Lector in particular, without firm proof. A signed confession would be best.'

'Sult's signed confession?' murmured Glokta.

'Such a document would seem to solve some problems for both of us. Sult would be gone, and the bankers would have lost their hold over you. The Gurkish would still be camped outside our walls of course, but one can't have everything.'

'The Arch Lector's signed confession.' *And shall I pluck the moon from the sky while I'm about it?*

'Or a big enough stone to start the landslide – perhaps the confession of someone suitably close to him. I understand that you are expert at obtaining them.' The High Justice peered at Glokta from under his heavy brows. 'Was I misinformed?'

'I cannot conjure evidence from thin air, your Worship.'

'Those lost in the desert must take the chances they are offered, however slender. Find evidence, and bring it to me. Then I can act, and not one moment before. You understand that I cannot take any risks for you. It is difficult to trust a man who chose his master, and now chooses another.'

'Chose?' Glokta felt his eyelid twitching again. 'If you believe that I chose any part of the pitiful shadow of a life you see before you, you are very much mistaken. I chose glory and success. The box did not contain what was written on the lid.'

'The world is full of tragic tales.' Marovia walked to the window, turning his back and staring out at the darkening sky. 'Especially now. You can hardly expect them to make any difference to a man of my experience. I wish you good day.'

Further comment seems pointless. Glokta rocked forwards, pushed himself painfully up to standing with the aid of his cane, and limped for the door. *But the tiniest glimmer of hope has come creeping into the dank cellar of my despair . . . I need only obtain a confession to High Treason from the head of his Majesty's Inquisition—*

'And Superior!' *Why can no one ever finish talking before I get up?* Glokta turned back into the room, his spine burning. 'If someone close to you is talking, you need to shut them up. Now. Only a fool would consider uprooting treason from the Closed Council before he had cut the weeds from his own lawn.'

'Oh, you need not worry about my garden, your Worship.' Glokta treated the High Justice to his most repulsive grin. 'I am even now sharpening my shears.'

Charity

Adua burned. The two westernmost districts – the Three Farms, at the south-western corner of the city, and the Arches, further north – were hacked with black wounds. Smoke was still pouring up from some of them, great columns lit in faint orange near the base. They spread out in oily smears, dragged away to the west by a stiff wind, drawing a muddy curtain across the setting sun.

Jezal watched in solemn silence, his hands bunched into numb fists on the parapet of the Tower of Chains. There was no sound up here but for the wind fumbling at his ears and, just occasionally, the slightest hint of distant battle. A war cry, or the screams of the wounded. Or perhaps only a sea-bird calling, high on the breeze. Jezal wished for a maudlin moment that he were a bird, and could simply fly from the tower and off over the Gurmish pickets, away from this nightmare. But escape would not be so easy.

‘Casamir’s Wall was first breached three days ago,’ Marshal Varuz was explaining in a monotonous drone. ‘We drove back the first two assaults, and held the Three Farms that night, but the next day there was another breach, and another. This damn fire-powder has changed all the bloody rules. A wall that would have stood a week they can bring down in an hour.’

‘Khalul always loved to tinker with his dust and his bottles,’ muttered Bayaz, unhelpfully.

‘They were in the Three Farms in force that night, and carried the gates into the Arches soon afterwards. Ever since, the whole western part of the city has been one running battle.’ The tavern where Jezal had celebrated his victory over Filio in the Contest was in that district. The tavern where he had sat with West and Jalenhorn, Kasper and Brint, before they went away to the North, and he to the Old Empire. Was that building now burning? Was it already a blackened shell?

‘We’re fighting them hand to hand in the streets by daylight. We’re mounting raids in the darkness, every night. Not a stride of ground is given up without it being soaked with Gurmish blood.’ Perhaps Varuz hoped to be inspiring, but he was only succeeding in making Jezal feel sick. The streets of his capital soaked in blood, whoever’s blood it might have been, was hardly his first aim as king of the Union. ‘Arnault’s Wall still stands firm, though there are fires burning in the centre of town. The flames almost reached the Four Corners last night, but the rain doused them down, at least for now. We’re fighting for every street, every house, every room. Just as you said we should, your Majesty.’

‘Good,’ Jezal managed to croak, but he almost choked on the word.

When he so blithely turned down General Malzagurt’s terms, he was not sure what he had been expecting. He had dimly imagined that someone would soon come to the rescue. That something heroic would occur. Only now the bloody business was well underway, and there was no sign of instant

deliverance. Probably there was heroism going on down there in the smoke. Soldiers hauling injured comrades to safety through the sooty darkness. Nurses stitching wounds by screaming candlelight. Townsfolk plunging into burning buildings to drag out coughing children. Heroism of an everyday and unglamorous kind. A kind that made no difference to the overall outcome.

'Are those our ships in the bay?' he asked quietly, already afraid of the answer.

'I wish they were, your Majesty. I never thought I'd say it, but they have the best of us by sea. You never saw so many damn ships. Even if most of our navy weren't ferrying the army back from Angland, I'm not sure what they could do. As it is, the men will have to be landed outside the city. It's a damned inconvenience, and it could get to be a great deal more than that. The docks are a weak spot. Sooner or later they may try to land men there.'

Jeza! looked nervously towards the water. Armies of Gurkish, pouring from their ships and into the heart of the city. The Middleway cut straight through the centre of Adua from the bay to the Agriont. A road invitingly wide enough to march an entire Gurkish legion straight down in a twinkling. He shut his eyes and tried to breathe evenly.

Before the arrival of the Gurkish he had hardly been able to have a moment's silence for the opinions of his councillors. Now that he actually needed advice, the torrent had suddenly run dry. Sult rarely appeared in the Closed Council, and then only to glare at Marovia. The High Justice himself had little to offer beyond bemoaning the fix they were all in. Even Bayaz' stock of historical examples seemed finally to be exhausted. Jeza! was left to carry the responsibility alone, and he was finding it quite a weight. He supposed it was a good deal more unpleasant for those that were actually wounded, or homeless, or killed, but that was slender consolation.

'How many are dead already?' he found himself asking, like a child picking at a scab. 'How many have we lost?'

'The fighting along Casamir's Wall was fierce. The fighting throughout the occupied districts has been fiercer yet. Casualties on both sides are heavy. I would guess at a thousand dead at least on our side.'

Jeza! swallowed sour spit. He thought about the mismatched defenders he had seen near the western gate, in a square now presumably overrun by Gurkish legions. Ordinary people, who had looked to him with hope and pride. Then he tried to picture what a thousand corpses might look like. He imagined a hundred of them, side by side, in a row. Then ten such rows, one above the other. A thousand. He gnawed at his thumbnail, already down to the painful quick.

'And many more wounded, of course,' added Varuz, in a sudden twist of the knife. 'We are very short of space for them, in fact. Two districts are at least partly occupied by the Gurkish and the enemy are landing incendiaries almost in the heart of the city.' Jeza!'s tongue sought out the still sore gap in his teeth. He remembered his own pain, out on the endless plain under the merciless sky, the stabs through his face as the cartwheels squeaked and jolted.

'Open the Agriont to the wounded, to the homeless. With the army away there is room to spare. Barracks for thousands, and ample provisions.'

Bayaz was shaking his bald head. 'A risk. We have no way of knowing who we would be letting in. Gurmish agents. Spies of Khalul. Not all of them are what they appear.'

Jeza! ground his teeth. 'I am prepared to take the risk. Am I king here, or not?'

'You are,' growled Bayaz, 'and you would be well advised to act like it. This is no time for sentiment. The enemy are closing on Arnault's Wall. In places they might be within two miles of where we stand.'

'Two miles?' murmured Jeza!, his eyes flickering nervously towards the west again. Arnault's Wall was a fine grey line through the buildings, looking a terribly frail sort of a barrier from up here, and worryingly close. A sudden fear gripped him. Not the guilty concern he felt for the theoretical people down there in the smoke, but a real and very personal fear for his own life. Like the one he had felt among the stones, when the two warriors advanced on him with murder in mind. Perhaps he had made a mistake not leaving the city when he had the chance. Perhaps it was not too late to—

'I will stand or fall alongside the people of the Union!' he shouted, as angry at his own cowardice as he was at the Magus. 'If they are willing to die for me, then I am willing to die for them!' He turned his shoulder towards Bayaz and quickly looked away. 'Open the Agriont, Marshal Varuz. You can fill the palace with wounded too, if you have to.'

Varuz glanced nervously sideways at Bayaz, then gave a stiff bow. 'Hospitals will be set up in the Agriont, then, your Majesty. The barracks will be opened to the people. The palace we had probably better leave sealed, at least until things get worse.'

Jeza! could hardly bear to imagine what worse might look like. 'Good, good. See it done.' He had to wipe a tear from under his eye as he turned away from the smouldering city and made for the long stair. The smoke, of course. Nothing but the smoke.

Queen Terez sat alone, framed in the window of their vast bedchamber.

The Countess Shalere was still lurking around the palace somewhere, but it seemed she had learned to keep her scorn well out of Jeza!'s way. The rest of Terez' ladies she had sent back to Styria before the Gurmish blockaded the harbour. Jeza! rather wished that he could have returned the queen herself along with the rest but that, unfortunately, was not an option.

Terez did not so much as glance in his direction as Jeza! shut the door. He had to stifle a heavy sigh as he trudged across the room, his boots muddy from the spitting rain, his skin greasy from the soot in the air outside.

'You are treading dirt with you,' said Terez, without looking round, her voice as icy as ever.

'War is a dirty business, my love.' He saw the side of her face twitch with disgust when he said the last two words, and hardly knew whether he wanted to laugh or cry at it. He dropped down heavily in the chair opposite her without touching his boots, knowing all the while that it would infuriate her. There was nothing he could do that would not.

‘Must you come to me in this manner?’ she snapped.

‘Oh, but I could not stay away! You are my wife, after all.’

‘Not by choice.’

‘It was not my choice either, but I am willing to make the best of things! Believe it or not I would rather have married someone who did not hate me!’ Jezal shoved one hand through his hair and pressed his anger down with some difficulty. ‘But let us not fight, please. I have enough fighting to do out there. More than I can stand! Can we not, at least . . . be civil to one another?’

She looked at him for a long moment, a thoughtful frown on her face. ‘How can you?’

‘How can I what?’

‘Keep trying.’

Jezal ventured a fragment of a grin. ‘I had hoped that you might come to admire my persistence, if nothing else.’ She did not smile, but he sensed, perhaps, the slightest softening of the hard line of her mouth. He hardly dared suppose that she might have finally begun to thaw, but he was willing to seize on the slightest shred of hope. Hope was in short supply, these days. He leaned towards her, staring earnestly into her eyes. ‘You have made it clear that you think very little of me, and I suppose that I hardly blame you. I do not think so very much of myself, believe me. But I am trying . . . I am trying very hard . . . to be a better man.’

The corner of Terez’ mouth twitched up in a sad kind of smile, but a kind of smile nonetheless. To his great surprise she reached out, and placed one hand tenderly on his face. His breath caught in his throat, skin tingling where her fingertips rested.

‘Why can you not understand that I despise you?’ she asked. He felt himself go very cold. ‘I despise the look of you, the feel of you, the sound of your voice. I despise this place and its people. The sooner the Gurkish burn it all to the ground the happier I’ll be.’ She took her hand away and turned back to the window, a glimmering of light down her perfect profile.

Jezal slowly stood up. ‘I think I will find another room to sleep in tonight. This one is altogether too cold.’

‘At last.’

It can be a terrible curse for a man to get everything he ever dreamed of. If the shining prizes turn out somehow to be empty baubles, he is left without even his dreams for comfort. All the things that Jezal had thought he wanted – power, fame, the beautiful trappings of greatness – they were nothing but dust. All he wanted now was for things to be as they had been, before he got them. But there was no way back. Not ever.

He really had nothing further to say. He turned stiffly and trudged for the door.

Better Left Buried

When the fighting is over you dig, if you're still alive. You dig graves for your dead comrades. A last mark of respect, however little you might have had for them. You dig as deep as you can be bothered, you dump them in, you cover them up, they rot away and are forgotten. That's the way it's always been.

There would be a lot of digging when this fight was done. A lot of digging for both sides.

Twelve days, now, since the fire started falling. Since the wrath of God began to rain on these arrogant pinks, and lay blackened waste to their proud city. Twelve days since the killing started – at the walls, and in the streets, and through the houses. For twelve days in the cold sunlight, in the spitting rain, in the choking smoke, and for twelve nights by the light of flickering fires, Ferro had been in the thick of it.

Her boots slapped against the polished tiles, leaving black marks down the immaculate hallway behind her. Ash. The two districts where the fighting was raging were covered in it, now. It had mingled with the thin rain to make a sticky paste, like black glue. The buildings that still stood, the charred skeletons of the ones that did not, the people who killed and the people who died, all coated in it. The scowling guards and the cringing servants frowned at her and the marks she left, but she had never cared a shit for their opinions, and was not about to start. They would have more ash than they knew what to do with soon. The whole place would be ash, if the Gurkish got their way.

And it looked very much as if they might. Each day and each night, for all the efforts of the rag-tag defenders, for all the dead they left among the ruins, the Emperor's troops worked their way further into the city.

Towards the Agriont.

Yulwei was sitting in the wide chamber when she got there, shrunken into a chair in one corner, the bangles hanging from his limp arms. The calmness which had always seemed to swaddle him like an old blanket was stripped away. He looked worried, worn, eyes sunken in dark sockets. A man looking defeat in the face. A look that Ferro was getting used to seeing over the past few days.

'Ferro Maljinn, back from the front. I always said that you would kill the whole world if you could, and now you have your chance. How do you like war, Ferro?'

'Well enough.' She tossed her bow rattling onto a polished table, dragged her sword out of her belt, shrugged off her quiver. She had only a few shafts left. Most of them she had left stuck through Gurkish soldiers, out there in the blackened ruins at the edge of the city.

But Ferro could not bring herself to smile.

Killing Gurkish was like eating honey. A little only left you craving more. Too much could become sickening. Corpses had always been a poor reward for

all the effort it took to make them. But there was no stopping now.

‘You are hurt?’

Ferro squeezed at the filthy bandage round her arm, and watched the blood seep out into the grey cloth. There was no pain. ‘No,’ she said.

‘It is not too late, Ferro. You do not need to die here. I brought you. I can still take you away. I go where I please, and I take who I please with me. If you stop killing now, who knows? Perhaps God will still find a place in heaven for you.’

Ferro was becoming very tired of Yulwei’s preaching. She and Bayaz might not have trusted each other a finger’s breadth, but they understood each other. Yulwei understood nothing.

‘“Heaven?”’ she sneered as she turned away from him. ‘Perhaps hell suits me better, did you think of that?’

She hunched up her shoulders as footsteps echoed down the hallway outside. She felt Bayaz’ anger even before the door was flung open and the old bald pink stormed into the room.

‘That little bastard! After all that I have given him, how does he repay me?’ Quai and Sulfur slunk through the doorway behind him like a pair of dogs creeping after their master. ‘He defies me before the Closed Council! He tells me to mind my business! Me! How would that cringing dunce know what is my business and what is not?’

‘Trouble with King Luthar the Magnificent?’ grunted Ferro.

The Magus narrowed his eyes at her. ‘A year ago there was no emptier head in the whole Circle of the World. Stick a crown on him and have a crowd of old liars tongue his arse for a few weeks and the little shit thinks he’s Stolicus!’

Ferro shrugged. Luthar had never lacked a high opinion of himself, king or not. ‘You should be more careful who you stick crowns on.’

‘That’s the trouble with crowns, they have to go on someone. All you can do is drop them in a crowd and hope for the best.’ Bayaz scowled over at Yulwei. ‘What of you brother? Have you been walking outside the walls?’

‘I have.’

‘And what have you seen?’

‘Death. Much of that. The Emperor’s soldiers flood into the western districts of Adua, his ships choke the bay. Every day more troops come up the road from the south, and tighten the Gurkish grip on the city.’

‘That much I can learn from those halfwits on the Closed Council. What of Mamun and his Hundred Words?’

‘Mamun, the thrice blessed and thrice cursed? Wondrous first apprentice of great Khalul, God’s right hand? He is waiting. He and his brothers, and his sisters, they have a great tent outside the bounds of the city. They pray for victory, they listen to sweet music, they bathe in scented water, they laze naked and enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. They wait for the Gurkish soldiers to carry the walls of the city, and they eat.’ He looked up at Bayaz. ‘They eat night and day, in open defiance of the Second Law. In brazen mockery of the solemn word of Euz. Making ready for the moment when they will come to seek you out. The moment for which Khalul made them. They think it will not be long, now. They polish their armour.’

‘Do they indeed?’ hissed Bayaz. ‘Damn them then.’

'They have damned themselves already. But that is no help to us.'

'Then we must visit the House of the Maker.' Ferro's head jerked up. There was something about that great, stark tower that had fascinated her ever since she first arrived in Adua. She found her eyes always drawn towards its mountainous bulk, rising untouchable, high above the smoke and the fury.

'Why?' asked Yulwei. 'Do you plan to seal yourself inside? Just as Kanedias did, all those years ago, when we came seeking our vengeance? Will you cower in the darkness, Bayaz? And this time, will you be the one thrown down, to break upon the bridge below?'

The First of the Magi snorted. 'You know me better than that. When they come for me I will face them in the open. But there are still weapons in the darkness. A surprise or two from the Maker's forge for our cursed friends beyond the walls.'

Yulwei looked even more worried than before. 'The Divider?'

'One edge here,' whispered Quai from the corner. 'One on the Other Side.'

Bayaz, as usual, ignored him. 'It can cut through anything, even an Eater.'

'Will it cut through a hundred?' asked Yulwei.

'I will settle for Mamun alone.'

Yulwei slowly unfolded himself from the chair, stood with a sigh. 'Very well, lead on. I will enter the Maker's House with you, one last time.'

Ferro licked her teeth. The idea of going inside was irresistible. 'I will come with you.'

Bayaz glared back. 'No, you will not. You can stay here and sulk. That has always been your special gift, has it not? I would hate to deny you the opportunity to make use of it. You will come with us,' he snapped at Quai. 'You have your business, eh, Yoru?'

'I do, Master Bayaz.'

'Good.' The First of the Magi strode from the room with Yulwei at his shoulder, his apprentice trudging at the rear. Sulfur did not move. Ferro frowned at him, and he grinned back, his head tipped against the panelled wall, his chin pointed towards the moulded ceiling.

'Are these Hundred Words not your enemies too?' Ferro demanded.

'My deepest and most bitter enemies.'

'Why do you not fight, then?'

'Oh, there are other ways to fight than struggling in the dirt out there.' There was something in those eyes, one dark, one bright, that Ferro did not like the look of. There was something hard and hungry behind his smiles. 'Though I would love to stay and chat, I must go and give the wheels another push.' He turned a finger round and round in the air. 'The wheels must keep turning, eh, Maljinn?'

'Go then,' she snapped. 'I will not stop you.'

'You could not if you wanted to. I would bid you a good day. But I'd wager you've never had one.' And he sauntered out, the door clicking to behind him.

Ferro was already across the room, shooting back the bolt on the window. She had done as Bayaz told her once before, and it had brought her nothing but a wasted year. She would make her own choices now. She jerked the hangings aside and slipped out onto the balcony. Curled-up leaves blew on the wind, whipping around the lawns below along with the spitting rain. A quick

glance up and down the damp paths showed only one guard, and he was looking the wrong way, huddled in his cloak.

Sometimes it is best to seize the moment.

Ferro swung her legs over the rail, gathered herself, then sprang out into the air. She caught a slippery tree branch, swung to the trunk, slid down it to the damp earth and crept behind a neatly clipped hedge, low to the ground.

She heard footsteps, then voices. Bayaz' voice, and Yulwei's, speaking soft into the hissing wind. Damn, but these old fools of Magi loved to flap their lips.

'Sulfur?' came Yulwei's voice. 'He is still with you?'

'Why would he not be?'

'His studies ran in . . . dangerous directions. I told you this, brother.'

'And? Khalul is not so picky with his servants . . .'

They passed out of earshot and Ferro had to rush along behind the hedge to keep pace, staying bent double.

' . . . I do not like this habit,' Yulwei was saying, 'of taking forms, of changing skin. A cursed discipline. You know what Juvens' feelings were on it —'

'I have no time to worry on the feelings of a man centuries in his grave. There is no Third Law, Yulwei.'

'Perhaps there should be. Stealing another's face . . . the tricks of Glustrod and his devil-bloods. Arts borrowed from the Other Side—'

'We must use such weapons as we can find. I have no love for Mamun, but he is right. They are called the Hundred Words because they are a hundred. We are two, and time has not been kind to us.'

'Then why do they wait?'

'You know Khalul, brother. Ever careful, watchful, deliberate. He will not risk his children until he must . . .'

Through the chinks in the bare twigs Ferro watched the three men pass between the guards and out of the gate in the high palace wall. She gave them a few moments, then she started up and strode after, shoulders back, as though she was about important business. She felt the hard stares of the armoured men flanking the gate, but they were used to her coming and going now. For once they kept their silence.

Between the great buildings, around the statues, through the dull gardens she followed the two Magi and their apprentice across the Agriont. She kept her distance, loitering in doorways, under trees, walking close behind those few people hurrying down the windy streets. Sometimes, above the buildings in a square, or at the end of a lane, the top of the great mass of the Maker's House reared up. Hazy grey through the drizzle to begin with, but growing more black, vast and distinct with each stride she took.

The three men led her to a ramshackle building with crumbling turrets sticking from its sagging roof. Ferro knelt and watched from behind a corner while Bayaz beat on the rickety door with the end of his staff.

'I am glad you did not find the Seed, brother,' said Yulwei, while they waited. 'That thing is better left buried.'

'I wonder if you will still think so when the Hundred Words swarm through the streets of the Agriont, howling for our blood?'

‘God will forgive me, I think. There are worse things than Khalul’s Eaters.’

Ferro’s nails dug into her palms. There was a figure standing at one of the grimy windows, peering out at Yulwei and Bayaz. A long, lean figure with a black mask and short hair. The woman who had chased her and Ninefingers, long before. Ferro’s hand strayed on an instinct towards her sword, then she realised she had left it in the palace, and cursed her foolishness. Ninefingers had been right. You could never have too many knives.

The door wobbled open, some words were muttered, the two old men went through, Quai at their back, head bowed. The masked woman watched for a while longer, then stepped back from the window into the darkness. Ferro sprang over a hedge as the door wobbled closed, wedged her foot in the gap and slid through sideways, stealing into the deep shadows on the other side. The door clattered shut on its creaking hinges.

Down a long hallway, dusty paintings on one wall, dusty windows in the other. All the way the back of Ferro’s neck prickled, waiting for the black masks to come boiling out of the shadows. But nothing came besides the echoing footsteps up ahead, the mindless droning of the old men’s voices.

‘This place has changed,’ Yulwei was saying. ‘Since that day we fought Kanedias. The day the Old Time ended. It rained, then.’

‘I remember it.’

‘I lay wounded on the bridge, in the rain. I saw them fall, the Maker and his daughter. From on high, they tumbled down. Hard to believe, that I smiled to see it, then. Vengeance is a fleeting thrill. The doubts, we carry to our graves.’ Ferro sneered at that. If she could have the vengeance she would live with the doubts.

‘Time has brought us both regrets,’ muttered Bayaz.

‘More of them with every passing year. A strange thing, though. I could have sworn, as I lay there, that it was Kanedias who fell first, and Tolomei second.’

‘Memory can tell lies, especially to men who have lived as long as we. The Maker threw down his daughter, then I him. And so the Old Time ended.’

‘So it did,’ murmured Yulwei. ‘So much lost. And now we are come to this . . .’

Quai’s head snapped round and Ferro plastered herself against the wall behind a leaning cabinet. He stood there, for a long moment, frowning towards her. Then he followed the others. Ferro waited, holding her breath, until the three of them turned a corner and passed out of sight.

She caught them up in a crumbling courtyard, choked with dead weeds, littered with broken slates fallen from the roofs above. A man in a stained shirt led them up a long stairway, towards a dark arch high in the high wall of the Agriont. He had a bunch of jingling keys in his gnarled hands, was muttering something about eggs. Once they had passed into the tunnel Ferro padded across the open space and up the steps, pausing near the top.

‘We will come back shortly,’ she heard Bayaz growling. ‘Leave the door ajar.’

‘It’s always kept locked,’ a voice answered. ‘That’s the rule. It’s been kept locked all my life, and I don’t plan to—’

‘Then wait here until we come back! But go nowhere! I have many better

things to do than sit waiting on the wrong side of your locked doors!’ Keys turned. Old hinges squealed. Ferro’s fingers slid round a loose lump of stone and gripped it tightly.

The man in the dirty shirt was pulling the gates shut as she crept to the top of the steps. He muttered angrily as he fumbled with his keys, metal clinking. There was a dull thump as the stone clubbed him across his bald spot. He gasped, lurched forward, Ferro caught his limp body under the arms and lowered him carefully to the ground.

Then she set the rock down and relieved him of his keys with a hooked finger.

As Ferro lifted her hand to push the doors open, a strange sensation washed over her. Like a cool breeze on a hot day, surprising, at first, then delightful. A shiver, not at all unpleasant, worked its way up her spine and made her breath catch. She pressed her hand to the weathered wood, the grain brushing warm and welcoming against her palm. She eased the door open just wide enough to peer through.

A narrow bridge sprang out from the wall of the Agriont, no more than a stride across, without rail or parapet. At the far end it met the side of the Maker’s House – a soaring cliff of bare rock, shining black with the rain. Bayaz, Yulwei and Quai stood before a gate at the end of that strip of stone. A gate of dark metal, marked in the centre with bright circles. Rings of letters that Ferro did not understand. She watched Bayaz pull something out from the collar of his shirt. She watched the circles begin to move, to turn, to spin, her heart pounding in her ears. The doors moved silently apart. Slowly, reluctantly, almost, the three men passed into that square of blackness, and were gone.

The House of the Maker stood open.

Grey water slapped at hard stone below as Ferro followed them across the bridge. The rain kissed and the wind nipped at her skin. In the distance, smudges of smoke rose from the smouldering city and into the muddy sky, but her eyes were fixed on the yawning portal straight ahead. She loitered on the threshold for a moment, her hands clenched into fists.

Then she stepped into the darkness.

It was neither cold nor warm on the other side of the gate. The air was so still, and flat, and silent that it seemed to weigh heavily on Ferro’s shoulders, to press at her ears. A few muffled steps and the light had all faded. Wind, and rain, and the open sky were dimly remembered dreams. She felt she walked a hundred miles beneath the dead earth. Time itself seemed to have stopped. Ferro crept up to a wide archway and peered through.

The hall beyond was like a temple, but it would have swallowed whole even the great temple in Shaffa, where thousands called hourly out to God. It dwarfed the lofty dome where Jezal dan Luthar had been given a crown. It was an expanse that made even the vastness of ruined Aulcus seem petty. A place crowded with solemn shadows, peopled with sullen echoes, bounded by angry, unyielding stone. The tomb of long-dead giants.

The grave of forgotten gods.

Yulwei and Bayaz stood at its centre. Tiny, insect figures in an ocean of gleaming darkness. Ferro pressed herself to the cold rock, striving to pick their

words out from the sea of echoes.

‘Go to the armoury and find some of the Maker’s blades. I will go up, and bring . . . that other thing.’

Bayaz turned away, but Yulwei caught him by the arm. ‘First answer me one question, brother.’

‘What question?’

‘The same one I always ask.’

‘Again? Even now? Very well, if you must. Ask.’

The two old men stood still for the longest time. Until the last echoes had faded and left only a silence as heavy as lead. Ferro held her breath.

‘Did you kill Juvens?’ Yulwei’s whisper hissed through the darkness. ‘Did you kill our master?’

Bayaz did not flinch. ‘I made mistakes, long ago. Many mistakes, I know. Some out in the ruined west. Some here, in this place. The day does not pass when I do not regret them. I fought with Khalul. I ignored my master’s wisdom. I trespassed in the House of the Maker. I fell in love with his daughter. I was proud, and vain, and rash, all this is true. But I did not kill Juvens.’

‘What happened that day?’

The First of the Magi spoke the words as though they were lines long rehearsed. ‘Kanedias came to take me. For seducing his daughter. For stealing his secrets. Juvens would not give me up. They fought, I fled. The fury of their battle lit the skies. When I returned, the Maker was gone, and our master was dead. I did not kill Juvens.’

Again a long silence, and Ferro watched, frozen. ‘Very well.’ Yulwei let fall his hand from Bayaz’ arm. ‘Mamun lied, then. Khalul lied. We will fight against them together.’

‘Good, my old friend, good. I knew that I could trust you, as you can trust me.’ Ferro curled her lip. Trust. It was a word that only liars used. A word the truthful had no need of. The First of the Magi’s footsteps rang out as he strode towards one of the many archways and vanished into the gloom.

Yulwei watched him go. Then he gave a sharp sigh, and padded off in the other direction, his bangles jingling on his thin arms. The echoes of his passing slowly faded, and Ferro was left alone with the shadows, wrapped in silence.

Slowly, carefully, she crept forwards into that immense emptiness. The floor glittered – snaking lines of bright metal, set into the black rock. The ceiling, if there was one, was shrouded in darkness. A high balcony ran around the walls a good twenty strides up, another far above that, then another, and another, vague in the half-light. Above all, a beautiful device hung. Rings of dark metal, great and small, gleaming discs and shining circles, marked with strange writings. All moving. All revolving, one ring about the other, and at their centre a black ball, the one point of perfect stillness.

She turned round, and round, or perhaps she stood still and the room turned about her. She felt dizzy, drunken, breathless. The bare rock soared away into the black, rough stones without mortar, no two alike. Ferro tried to imagine how many stones the tower was made of.

Thousands. Millions.

What had Bayaz said, on the island at the edge of the World? Where does

the wise man hide a stone? Among a thousand. Among a million. The rings high above shifted gently. They pulled at her, and the black ball in the centre pulled at her most of all. Like a beckoning hand. Like a voice calling out her name.

She dug her fingers into the dry spaces between the stones and began to climb, hand over hand, up and up. It was easily done. As though the wall was meant to be climbed. Soon she swung her legs over the metal rail of the first balcony. On again, without pausing for breath, up and up. She reached the second balcony, sticky with sweat in the dead air. She reached the third, breath rasping. She gripped the rail of the fourth, and pulled herself over. She stood, staring down.

Far below, at the bottom of a black abyss, the whole Circle of the World lay on the round floor of the hall. A map, the coastlines picked out in shining metal. Level with Ferro, filling almost all the space within the gently curving gallery, suspended on wires no thicker than threads, the great mechanism slowly revolved.

She frowned at the black ball in its centre, her palms tingling. It seemed to hover there, without support. She should have wondered how that could be, but all she could think about was how much she wanted to touch it. Needed to. She had no choice. One of the metal circles drifted close to her, gleaming dully.

Sometimes it is best to seize the moment.

She sprang up onto the rail, crouched there for an instant, gathering herself. She did not think. Thinking would have been madness. She leapt into empty space, limbs flailing. The whole machine wobbled and swayed as she caught hold of its outermost ring. She swung underneath, hanging breathless. Slowly, delicately, her tongue pressed into the roof of her mouth, she pulled herself up by her arms, hooked her legs over the metal and dragged herself along it. Soon it brought her close to a wide disc, scored with grooves, and she clambered from one to the other, body trembling with effort. The cool metal quivered under her weight, twisting and flexing, wobbling with her every movement, threatening to shrug her off into the empty void. Ferro might have had no fear in her.

But plunges of a hundred strides onto the hardest of hard rock still demanded her deep respect.

So she slithered out, from one ring to another, hardly daring even to breathe. She told herself there was no drop. She was only climbing trees, sliding between their branches, the way she had when she was a child, before the Gurkish came. Finally she caught hold of the innermost ring. She clung to it, furious tight, waiting until its own movement brought her close to the centre. She hung down, legs crossed around the frail metal, one hand gripping it, the other reaching out towards that gleaming black ball.

She could see her rigid face reflected in its perfect surface, her clawing hand, swollen and distorted. She strained forward with every nerve, teeth gritted. Closer, and closer yet. All that mattered was to touch it. The very tip of her middle finger brushed against it and, like a bubble bursting, it vanished into empty mist.

Something dropped free, falling, slowly, as if it sank through water. Ferro

watched it tumble away from her, a darker spot in the inky darkness, down, and down. It struck the floor with a boom that seemed to shake the very foundations of the Maker's House, filled the hall with crashing echoes. The ring that Ferro clung to trembled and for a giddy instant she nearly lost her grip. When she managed to haul herself back she realised that it had stopped moving.

The whole device was still.

It seemed to take her an age to clamber back across the motionless rings to the topmost gallery, to make the long descent down the towering walls. When she finally dropped to the floor of the cavernous chamber her clothes were torn, her hands, elbows, knees grazed and bloody, but she scarcely noticed. She ran across the wide floor, her footsteps ringing out. Towards the very centre of the hall, where the thing that had fallen from above still lay.

It looked like nothing more than an uneven chunk of dark stone the size of a big fist. But this was no stone, and Ferro knew it. She felt something leaking from it, pouring out in, flooding out in thrilling waves. Something that could not be seen, or touched, and yet filled the whole space to its darkest reaches. Invisible, yet irresistible, it flowed tingling around her and dragged her forwards.

Ferro's heart thumped at her ribs as her footsteps drew close. Her mouth flooded with hungry spit as she knelt beside it. Her breath clawed in her throat as she reached out, palm itching. Her hand closed around its pocked and pitted surface. Very heavy, and very cold, as if it were a chunk of frozen lead. She lifted it slowly up, turning it in her hand, watching it glitter in the darkness, fascinated.

'The Seed.'

Bayaz stood in one of the archways, face trembling with an ugly mixture of horror and delight. 'Leave, Ferro, now! Take it to the palace.' He flinched, raised one arm, as if to shield his eyes from a blinding glare. 'The box is in my chambers. Put it inside, and seal it tight, do you hear me? Seal it tight!'

Ferro turned away, scowling, not sure now which of the archways led out of the Maker's House.

'Wait!' Quai was padding across the floor towards her, his gleaming eyes fixed on her hand. 'Stay!' He showed no trace of fear as he came closer. Only an awful kind of hunger, strange enough that Ferro took a step away. 'It was here. Here, all along.' His face looked pale, slack, full of shadows. 'The Seed.' His white hand crept through the darkness towards her. 'At last. Give it to—'

He crumpled up like discarded paper, was ripped from his feet and flung away the whole width of the vast room in the time it took Ferro to drag in one stunned breath. He hit the wall just below the lowest balcony with an echoing crunch. She watched open-mouthed as his shattered body bounced off and tumbled to the ground, broken limbs flopping.

Bayaz stepped forward, his staff clenched tightly in his fist. The air around his shoulders was still shimmering ever so slightly. Ferro had killed many men, of course, and shed no tears. But the speed of this shocked even her.

'What did you do?' she hissed, the echoes of Quai's fatal impact with the far wall still thudding about them.

'What I had to. Get to the palace. Now.' Bayaz stabbed at one of the

archways with a heavy finger, and Ferro saw the faintest glimmer of light inside it. 'Put that thing into the box! You cannot imagine how dangerous it is!'

Few people liked taking orders less, but Ferro had no wish to stay in this place. She stuffed the lump of rock down inside her shirt. It felt right there, pressed against her stomach. Cool and comforting, for all Bayaz called it dangerous. She took one step, and as her boot slapped down a grating chuckle floated up from the far side of the hall.

From where Quai's ruined corpse had fallen.

Bayaz did not seem surprised. 'So!' he shouted. 'You show yourself at last! I have suspected for some time that you were not who you appeared to be! Where is my apprentice, and when did you replace him?'

'Months ago.' Quai was still chuckling as he pushed himself slowly up from the polished floor. 'Before you left on your fool's errand to the Old Empire.' There was no blood on his smiling face. Not so much as a graze. 'I sat beside you, at the fire. I watched you while you lay helpless in that cart. I was with you all the way, to the edge of the World and back. Your apprentice stayed here. I left his half-eaten corpse in the bushes for the flies, not twenty strides from where you and the Northman soundly slept.'

'Huh.' Bayaz tossed his staff from one hand to the other. 'I thought I noted a sharp improvement in your skills. You should have killed me then, when you had the chance.'

'Oh, there is time now.' Ferro shivered as she watched Quai stand. The hall seemed to have grown suddenly very cold.

'A hundred words? Perhaps. One word?' Bayaz' lip curled. 'I think not. Which of Khalul's creatures are you? The East Wind? One of those damned twins?'

'I am not one of Khalul's creatures.'

The faintest flicker of doubt passed over Bayaz' face. 'Who, then?'

'We knew each other well, in times long past.'

The First of the Magi frowned. 'Who are you? Speak!'

'Taking forms.' A woman's voice, soft and low. Something was happening to Quai's face as he paced slowly forward. His pale skin drooped, twisted. 'A dread and insidious trick.' His nose, his eyes, his lips began to melt, running off his skull like wax down a candle. 'Do you not remember me, Bayaz?' Another face showed itself beneath, a hard face, white as pale marble. 'You said that you would love me forever.' The air was icy chill. Ferro's breath was smoking before her mouth. 'You promised me that we would never be parted. When I opened my father's gate to you . . .'

'No!' Bayaz took a faltering step back.

'You look surprised. Not as surprised as I was, when instead of taking me in your arms you threw me down from the roof, eh, my love? And why? So that you could keep your secrets? So that you could seem noble?' Quai's long hair had turned white as chalk. It floated now about a woman's face, terribly pale, eyes two bright, black points. Tolomei. The Maker's daughter. A ghost, stepped out of the faded past. A ghost that had walked beside them for months, wearing a stolen shape. Ferro could almost feel her icy breath, cold as death on the air. Her eyes flickered from that pale face to the archway, far

away across the floor, caught between wanting to run, and needing to know more.

‘I saw you in your grave!’ whispered Bayaz. ‘I piled the earth over you myself!’

‘So you did, and wept when you did, as though you had not been the one to throw me down.’ Her black eyes swivelled to Ferro, to where the Seed lay tingling against her belly. ‘But I had touched the Other Side. In these two hands I had held it, while my father worked, and it had left me altered. There I lay, in the earth’s cold embrace. Between life and death. Until I heard the voices. The voices that Glustrod heard, long ago. They offered me a bargain. My freedom for theirs.’

‘You broke the First Law!’

‘Laws mean nothing to the buried! When I finally clawed my way from the grasping earth the human part of me was gone. But the other part, the part that belongs to the world below – that cannot die. It stands before you. Now I will complete the work that Glustrod began. I will throw open the doors that my grandfather sealed. This world and the Other Side shall be one. As they were before the Old Time. As they were always meant to be.’ She held out her open hand, and a bitter chill flowed from it and sent shivers across Ferro’s back to the tips of her fingers. ‘Give me the Seed, child. I made a promise to the Tellers of Secrets, and I keep the promises I make.’

‘We shall see!’ snarled the First of the Magi. Ferro felt the tugging in her stomach, saw the air around Bayaz begin to blur. Tolomei stood ten strides away from him. The next instant she struck him with a sound like a thunderclap. His staff burst apart, splintered wood flying. He gave a shocked splutter as he flew through the darkness, rolled over and over across the cold stone to lie face down in a crumpled heap. Ferro stared as a wave of freezing air washed over her. She felt a sick and terrible fear, all the worse for being unfamiliar. She stood frozen.

‘The years have made you weak.’ The Maker’s daughter moved slowly now, silently towards Bayaz’ senseless body, her white hair flowing out behind her like the ripples on a frosty pool. ‘Your Art cannot harm me.’ She stood over him, her dry white lips spreading into an icy smile. ‘For all you took from me. For my father.’ She raised her foot above Bayaz’ bald head. ‘For myself—’

She burst into brilliant flames. Harsh light flickered to the furthest corners of the cavernous chamber, brightness stabbed into the very cracks between the stones. Ferro stumbled back, holding one hand over her eyes. Between her fingers she saw Tolomei reel madly across the floor, thrashing and dancing, white flames wreathing her body, her hair a coiling tongue of fire.

She flopped to the ground, the darkness closing back in, smoke pouring up in a reeking cloud. Yulwei padded out from one of the archways, his dark skin shining with sweat. He held a bundle of swords under one scrawny arm. Swords of dull metal, like the one that Ninefingers had carried, each marked with a single silver letter. ‘Are you alright, Ferro?’

‘I . . .’ The fire had brought no warmth with it. Ferro’s teeth were rattling, the hall had grown so cold. ‘I . . .’

‘Go.’ Yulwei frowned at Tolomei’s body as the last flames died. Ferro finally found the strength to move, began to back away. She felt a bitter sinking in

her gut as she watched the Maker's daughter climb up, the ash of Quai's clothes sliding from her body. She stood, tall and deathly lean, naked and as bald as Bayaz, her hair all seared away to grey dust. There was not so much as a mark on her corpse-pale skin, gleaming flawless white.

'Always there is something more.' She glared at Yulwei with her flat black eyes. 'No fire can burn me, conjuror. You cannot stop me.'

'But I must try.' The Magus flung his swords into the air. They turned, spun, edges glittering, spreading apart in the darkness, drifting impossibly sideways. They began to fly around Yulwei and Ferro in a whirling circle. Faster and faster until they were a blur of deadly metal. Close enough that if Ferro had reached out, her hand would have been snatched off at the wrist.

'Stand still,' said Yulwei.

That hardly needed saying. Ferro felt a surge of anger, hot and familiar. 'First I should run, then stand still? First the Seed is at the Edge of the World, and now it is here at the centre? First she is dead and now she has stolen another's face? You old bastards need to get your stories straight.'

'They are liars!' snarled Tolomei, and Ferro felt the cold of her freezing breath wash over her cheek and chill her to the bone. 'Users! You cannot trust them!'

'But I can trust you?' Ferro snorted her contempt. 'Fuck yourself!'

Tolomei nodded slowly. 'Then die, along with the rest.' She padded sideways, balanced on her toes, rings of white frost spreading out wherever her bare feet touched the ground. 'You cannot keep juggling your knives forever, old man.'

Over her white shoulder, Ferro saw Bayaz get slowly to his feet, holding one arm with the other, rigid face scratched and bloody. Something dangled from his limp fist – a long mass of metal tubes with a hook on the end, dull metal gleaming in the darkness. His eyes rolled to the far-off ceiling, veins bulging from his neck with effort as the air began to twist around him. Ferro felt that sucking in her gut and her eyes were drawn upwards. Up to the great machine that hung above their heads. It began to tremble.

'Shit,' she muttered, starting to back away.

If Tolomei noticed, she showed no sign. She bent her knees and sprang high into the air, a white streak over the spinning swords. She hung above for an instant, then plummeted down towards Yulwei. She crashed into the floor, knees first, the impact making the ground shake. A splinter of stone grazed Ferro's cheek and she felt a blast of icy wind against her face, lurched a step back.

The Maker's daughter frowned up. 'You do not die easily, old man,' she snarled as the echoes faded.

Ferro could not tell how Yulwei had avoided her, but now he danced away, his hands moving in slow circles, bangles jingling, swords still tumbling through the air behind him. 'I have been working at it all my life. You do not die easily either.'

The Maker's daughter stood and faced him. 'I do not die.'

High above the huge device lurched, cables pinged as they snapped, whipping in the darkness. With an almost dreamlike slowness, it began to fall. Glittering metal twisted, flexed, shrieked as it tumbled down. Ferro turned and

ran. Five breathless strides and she flung herself down, sliding flat on her face across the polished rock. She felt the Seed digging into her stomach, the wind of the spinning swords ripping close to her back as she passed just beneath them.

The great machine hit the floor behind her with a noise like the music of hell. Each ring made a vast cymbal, a giant's gong. Each struck its own mad note, a screaming, clanging, booming of tortured metal, loud enough to make every one of Ferro's bones buzz. She looked up to see one great disc reel past her, clattering on its edge, striking bright sparks from the floor. Another flew into the air, spin-ning crazily like a flipped coin. She gasped as she rolled out of its way, scrambled back as it crashed into the ground beside her.

Where Yulwei and Tolomei had faced each other there was a hill of twisted metal, of broken rings and leaning discs, bent rods and tangled cables. Ferro struggled dizzily to her feet, a fury of discordant echoes ripping about the hall. Splinters dropped around her, pinging from the polished floor. Fragments were scattered the width of the hall, glinting in the shadows like stars in the night sky.

She had no idea who was dead and who alive.

'Out!' Bayaz growled at her through gritted teeth, face a twisted mask of pain. 'Out! Go!'

'Yulwei,' she muttered, 'is he—'

'I will come back for him!' Bayaz flailed at her with his good arm. 'Go!'

There are times to fight, and there are times to run, and Ferro knew well the difference. The Gurkish had taught it to her, deep in the Badlands. The archway jerked and wobbled as she sprinted towards it. Her own breath roared in her ears. She leaped over a gleaming wheel of metal, boots slapping at the smooth stone. She was almost at the archway. She felt a bitter chill at her side, a rush of sick terror. She flung herself forwards.

Tolomei's white hand missed Ferro by a whisker, tore a great chunk of stone from the wall and filled the air with dust.

'You go nowhere!'

Time to run, perhaps, but Ferro's patience was all worn down. As she sprang up her fist already swinging, all the fury of her wasted months, her wasted years, her wasted life behind it. Her knuckles hit Tolomei's jaw with a sharp crunch. It was like punching a block of ice. There was no pain as her hand broke, but she felt her wrist buckle, her arm go numb. Too late to worry on it. Her other fist was on its way.

Tolomei snatched her arm from the air before it touched her, dragged Ferro close, twisting her helpless onto her knees with awful, irresistible strength. 'The Seed!' The hissing words froze across Ferro's face, snatching her breath out in a sick groan, her skin burning where Tolomei held her. She felt her bones twist, then snap, her forearm clicking sideways like a broken stick. A white hand crept through the shadows towards the lump in Ferro's shirt.

There was a sudden light, a brilliant curve of it that lit the whole chamber for a blinding instant. Ferro heard a piercing shriek and she was free, sprawling on her back. Tolomei's hand was sliced off cleanly just above the wrist, leaving a bloodless stump. A great wound was scored down the smooth wall and deep into the floor, molten stone running from it, bubbling and

sizzling. Smoke curled from the strange weapon in Bayaz' hand as he lurched from the shadows, the hook at its end still glowing orange. Tolomei gave an icy scream, one hand clawing at him.

Bayaz roared mindlessly back at her, his eyes narrowed, his bloody mouth wide open. Ferro felt a twisting at her stomach, so savage she was bent over, almost dragged to her knees. The Maker's daughter was snatched up and blasted away, one white heel tearing a long scar through the map on the floor, gouging through rock and ripping up metal.

The wreck of the grand device was blown apart behind her, its ruined pieces scattered glittering in the darkness like leaves on the wind. Tolomei was a flailing shape in a storm of flying metal. She hit the distant wall with an earth-shaking boom, flinging out chunks of broken stone. A hail of twisted fragments rattled, rang, clanged against the rock around her. Rings, pins, slivers like dagger blades wedged into the wall, making the whole great curve of stone a giant bed of nails.

Bayaz' eyes bulged, his gaunt face wet with sweat. 'Die, devil!' he bellowed.

Dust filtered down, rock began to shift. Cold laughter echoed out across the hall. Ferro scrambled back, heels kicking at the smooth stone, and she ran. Her broken hand shuddered over the wall of the tunnel, her broken arm dangled. A square of light came jolting towards her. The door of the Maker's House.

She tottered out into the air, stinging bright after the shadows, the thin rain warm after Tolomei's freezing touch. The Seed still weighed heavy in her shirt, rough and comforting against her skin.

'Run!' came Bayaz' voice from the darkness. 'To the palace!' Ferro tottered across the bridge, clumsy feet slipping on wet stone, cold water lurching far below. 'Put it in the box, and seal it tight!' She heard an echoing boom behind her, metal clashing against metal, but she did not look back.

She shouldered her way through the open doors in the wall of the Agriont, nearly tripping over the doorman, sitting against the wall where she had left him with one hand clasped to his head. She sprang over him as he cringed away, flew down the steps three at a time, across the crumbling courtyard, down the dusty corridors, sparing no thought for masked figures or for anyone else. They seemed a pitiful, everyday sort of threat, now. She could still feel the icy breath on her neck.

Nothing mattered but to put it far behind her.

She slid up to the door, fumbled at the bolt with the heel of her broken hand, burst out into the drizzle and pounded down the wet streets the way she had come. The people in the lanes and squares stumbled back out of her way, shocked at the sight of her, desperate and bloody. Angry voices echoed after her but she ignored them, turned a corner onto a wide street between grey buildings and nearly slid right over on the wet stones.

A great crowd of dishevelled people were choking the road. Women, children, old men, dirty and shambling.

'Out of my way!' she screamed, and started to force a path through. 'Move!' The story Bayaz had told on the endless plain nagged at the back of her mind. How the soldiers had found the Seed in the ruins of Aulcus. How they had withered and died. She pushed and kicked and shouldered her way through

the press. 'Move!' She tore free of them and sprinted off down the empty street, her broken arm held against her body, against the thing inside her shirt.

She ran across the park, leaves fluttering down from the trees with each chilly gust. The high wall of the palace rose up where the lawns ended and Ferro made for the gate. The two guards still flanked it just as they always did, and she knew they were watching her. They might have let her out, but they were not so keen on letting her in, especially filthy, bloody, covered in dirt and sweat, and running as if she had a devil at her heels.

'Wait, you!' Ferro made to duck past them but one grabbed hold of her.

'Let me go you fucking pink fools!' she hissed. 'You don't understand!' She tried to twist away, and a gilded halberd fell to the ground as one of the guards wrapped his arms around her.

'Explain it, then!' snapped out from behind the visor of the other. 'Why the hurry?' His gauntleted fist reached out towards the bulge in her shirt. 'What have you got—'

'No!' Ferro hissed and squirmed, stumbled against the wall bearing one guard clanking back into the archway. The halberd of the other swung down smoothly, its glittering point levelled at Ferro's chest.

'Hold still!' he growled, 'before I—'

'Let her in! Now!' Sulfur stood on the other side of the gates, and for once he was not smiling. The guard's head turned doubtfully towards him. 'Now!' he roared, 'in the name of Lord Bayaz!'

They let her free and Ferro tore away, cursing. She ran through the gardens, into the palace, boots echoing in the hallways, servants and guards moving suspiciously out of her way. She found the door of Bayaz' rooms and fumbled it open, stumbled through. The box sat open on a table near the window, an unremarkable block of dark metal. She strode across to it, unbuttoned her shirt and pulled out the thing inside.

A dark, heavy stone, the size of a fist. Its dull surface was still cold, no warmer than when she had first picked it up. Her hand tingled pleasantly, as if at the touch of an old friend. It made her angry, somehow, to even think of letting go.

So this, at last, was the Seed. The Other Side, made flesh. The very stuff of magic. She remembered the blighted ruins of Aulus. The dead expanse of the land around it, for a hundred miles in every direction. Power enough to send the Emperor, and the Prophet, and his cursed Eaters, and the whole nation of Gurkhul to hell, and more besides. Power so terrible that it should have belonged to God alone, held now, in her frail fist. She stared down at it for a long time. Then, slowly, Ferro began to smile.

Now she would have vengeance.

The sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside brought her suddenly to her senses. She dropped the Seed into its resting place, jerked her hand away with an effort and snapped the lid of the box closed. As if a candle flame had been suddenly blown out in a darkened room, the world seemed dimmer, weaker, robbed of excitement. It was only then that she realised her hand was whole. She frowned down at it, working her fingers. They moved as easily as ever, not the slightest swelling around knuckles she had been sure were

shattered. Her other arm too, the forearm straight and smooth, no sign of a mark where Tolomei's freezing fingers had crushed it. Ferro looked towards the box. She had always healed quickly. But bones set, within an hour?

That was not right.

Bayaz dragged himself grimacing through the doorway. There was dry blood caked to his beard, a sheen of sweat across his bald head. He was breathing hard, skin pale and twitching, one arm pressed to his side. He looked like a man who had spent the afternoon fighting a devil, and had only just survived.

'Where is Yulwei?'

The First of the Magi stared back at her. 'You know where he is.'

Ferro remembered the echoing bang as she ran from the tower. Like the sound of a door being shut. A door that no blade, no fire, no magic could open. Bayaz alone had the key. 'You did not go back. You sealed the gates with them inside.'

'Sacrifices must be made, Ferro, you know this. I have made a great sacrifice today. My own brother.' The First of the Magi hobbled across the room towards her. 'Tolomei broke the First Law. She struck a deal with the Tellers of Secrets. She meant to use the Seed to open the gates to the world below. She could be more dangerous than all of Khalul's Eaters. The House of the Maker must remain sealed. Until the end of time, if need be. An outcome not without irony. She began her life imprisoned in that tower. Now she has returned. History moves in circles, just as Juvenis always said.'

Ferro frowned. 'Fuck your circles, pink. You lied to me. About Tolomei. About the Maker. About everything.'

'And?'

She frowned even harder. 'Yulwei was a good man. He helped me in the desert. He saved my life.'

'And mine, more than once. But good men will only go so far along dark paths.' Bayaz' bright eyes slid down to rest on the cube of dark metal under Ferro's hand. 'Others must walk the rest of the way.'

Sulfur stepped through the doorway, and Bayaz pulled the weapon he had brought from the House of the Maker from under his coat, grey metal glinting in the soft light from the windows. A relic of the Old Time. A weapon that Ferro had seen cut stone as if it was butter. Sulfur took it from him with a nervous respect, wrapped it carefully in an old oilskin. Then he flipped open his satchel and slid out the old black book that Ferro had seen once before. 'Now?' he muttered.

'Now.' Bayaz took it from him, placed his hand gently on the scarred cover, closed his eyes and took a long breath. When he opened them he was looking straight at Ferro. 'The paths we must walk now, you and I, are dark indeed. You have seen it.'

She had no answer. Yulwei had been a good man, but the gate of the Maker's House was sealed, and he was gone to heaven, or to hell. Ferro had buried many men, in many ways. One more pile of dirt in the desert was nothing to remark upon. She was sick of stealing her revenge one grain at a time. Dark paths did not scare her. She had been walking them all her life. Even through the metal of the box, she thought that she heard the barest hint

of a whisper, calling to her. 'All I want is vengeance.'

'And you shall have it, just as I promised.'

She stood face to face with Bayaz, and she shrugged. 'Then what does it matter now, who killed who a thousand years ago?'

The First of the Magi smiled a sickly smile, his eyes bright in his pale and bloody face. 'You speak my very thoughts.'

Tomorrow's Hero

The hooves of Jezal's grey charger clopped obediently in the black mud. It was a magnificent beast, the very kind he had always dreamed of riding. Several thousand marks-worth of horse flesh, he did not doubt. A steed that could give any man who sat on it, however worthless, the air of royalty. His shining armour was of the best Styrian steel, chased with gold. His cloak was of the finest Suljuk silk, trimmed with ermine. The hilt of his sword was crusted with diamonds, twinkling as the clouds flowed overhead to let the sun peep through. He had foregone the crown today in favour of a simple golden circlet, its weight considerably less wearisome on the sore spots he had developed round his temples.

All the trappings of majesty. Ever since he was a child, Jezal had dreamed of being exalted, worshipped, obeyed. Now the whole business made him want to be sick. Although that might only have been because he had scarcely slept last night, and scarcely eaten that morning.

Lord Marshal Varuz rode on Jezal's right, looking as if age had suddenly caught up with him. He seemed shrunken in his uniform, stooped and slump-shouldered. His movements had lost their steely precision, his eyes their icy focus. He had developed, somehow, the very slightest hint of not knowing what to do.

'Fighting still continues in the Arches, your Majesty,' he was explaining, 'but we have only toe-holds there. The Gurkish have the Three Farms under firm control. They moved their catapults forward to the canal, and last night they threw incendiaries far into the central district. As far as the Middleway and beyond. Fires were burning until dawn. Still are burning, in some parts. The damage has been . . . extensive.'

A crashing understatement. Whole sections of the city had been devastated by fire. Whole rows of buildings, that Jezal remembered as grand houses, busy taverns, clattering workshops, reduced to blackened wreckage. Looking at them was as horrifying as seeing an old lover open their mouth to reveal two rows of shattered teeth. The reek of smoke, and burning, and death clawed constantly at Jezal's throat and had reduced his voice to a gravelly croak.

A man streaked with ash and dirt looked up from picking through the wreckage of a still-smoking house. He stared at Jezal and his guards as they trotted past.

'Where is my son?' he shrieked suddenly. 'Where is my son?'

Jezal carefully looked away and gave his horse the slightest suggestion of a spur. He did not need to offer his conscience any further weapons with which to stab at him. It was already exceedingly well armed.

'Arnault's Wall still holds, though, your Majesty.' Varuz spoke considerably louder than was necessary in a futile effort to smother the heartbroken wails still ringing through the ruins behind them. 'Not a single Gurkish soldier has

yet set foot in the central district of the city. Not one.'

Jezal wondered how much longer they would be able to make that boast. 'Have we received any news from Lord Marshal West?' he demanded for the second time that hour, the tenth time that day.

Varuz gave Jezal the same answer he would no doubt receive ten times more before descending into a fitful sleep that night. 'I regret that we are almost utterly cut off, your Majesty. News arrives but rarely through the Gurmish cordon. But there have been storms off Angland. We must face the possibility that the army will be delayed.'

'Black luck,' murmured Bremer dan Gorst from the other side, his narrow eyes flickering endlessly over the ruins for the slightest sign of any threat. Jezal chewed worriedly at the salty remnant of his thumbnail. He could scarcely remember the last shred of good news. Storms. Delays. Even the elements were ranged against them, it seemed.

Varuz had nothing to lift the mood. 'And now illness has broken out in the Agriont. A swift and merciless plague. A large group of the civilians to whom you opened the gates have succumbed, all at once. It has extended to the palace itself. Two Knights of the Body have already died from it. One day they were standing guard at the gate, as always. The next night they were in their coffins. Their bodies withered, their teeth rotted, their hair fell out. The corpses are burned, but more cases appear. The physicians have never seen the like before, have no notion of a cure. Some are saying it is a Gurmish curse.'

Jezal swallowed. The magnificent city, the work of so many pairs of hands over long centuries, it had taken only a few short weeks of his tender care to transform into charred wreckage. Its proud people were mostly reduced to stinking beggars, to shrieking wounded, to wailing mourners. Those who had not been reduced to corpses. He was the most pathetic excuse for a king the Union could ever have spawned. He could not bring happiness to his own bitter sham of a marriage, let alone a nation. His reputation was all based on lies that he had not the courage to deny. He was a powerless, spineless, helpless cipher.

'Whereabouts are we now?' he mumbled as they rode out into a great, windswept space.

'Why, this is the Four Corners, your Majesty.'

'This? This cannot . . .' He trailed off, recognition coming as sharply as a slap in the face.

Only two walls of the building that had once been the Mercers' guildhall still stood, windows and doorways gaping like the stricken features of corpses, frozen at the moment of their deaths. The paving where hundreds of merry stalls had once been set out was cracked and caked with sticky soot. The gardens were leafless patches of mud and burned briar. The air should have been ringing with the calls of traders, the prattle of servants, the laughter of children. Instead it was deadly silent but for a cold wind hissing through the wreckage, sweeping waves of black grit through the heart of the city.

Jezal pulled on his reins, and his escort of some twenty Knights of the Body, five Knights Herald, a dozen of Varuz' staff and a nervous page or two clattered to a halt around him. Gorst frowned up towards the sky. 'Your

Majesty, we should move on. It is not safe here. We do not know when the Turkish will begin their bombardment again.'

Jezal ignored him, swung down from his saddle and walked out into the wreckage. It was difficult to believe that it was the same place where he had once bought wine, shopped for trinkets, been measured for a new uniform. Not one hundred strides away, on the other side of a row of smoking ruins, stood the statue of Harod the Great where he had met Ardee in the darkness, it seemed a hundred years ago.

A sorry group were clustered near there now, round the edge of a trampled garden. Women and children, mostly, and a few old men. Dirty and despairing, several with crutches or bloody bandages, clutching salvaged oddments. Those rendered homeless in last night's fires, last night's fighting. Jezal's breath caught in his throat. Ardee was one of them, sitting on a stone in a thin dress, shivering and staring at the ground, her dark hair fallen across half of her face. He started towards her, the first time he had smiled in what felt like weeks.

'Ardee.' She turned, eyes wide open, and Jezal froze. A different girl, younger and considerably less attractive. She blinked up at him, rocking slowly back and forward. His hands twitched ineffectually, he mumbled something incoherent. They were all watching him. He could hardly just walk off. 'Please, take this.' He fumbled with the gilded clasps on his crimson cloak and held it out to her.

She said nothing as she took it from him, only stared. A ridiculous, worthless gesture, almost offensive in its burning hypocrisy. But the rest of the homeless civilians did not seem to think so.

'A cheer for King Jezal!' someone shouted, and a rousing clamour went up.

A young lad on a crutch gazed at him with moon-eyed desperation. A soldier had a bloody bandage over one eye, the other rimmed with proud moisture. A mother clutched a baby wrapped in what looked horribly like a shred of cloth from a fallen Union flag. It was as if the whole scene had been carefully posed for the greatest emotional impact. A set of painter's models for a lurid and ham-fisted piece on the horrors of war.

'King Jezal!' came the shout again, accompanied by a weak, 'Hurrah!'

Their adulation was like poison to him. It only made the great weight of responsibility press down all the heavier. He turned away, unable to maintain his twisted mockery of a smile one instant longer.

'What have I done?' he whispered, his hands tugging ceaselessly at each other. 'What have I done?' He clambered back up into the saddle, guilt picking at his guts. 'Take me closer to Arnault's Wall.'

'Your Majesty, I hardly think that—'

'You heard me! Closer to the fighting. I want to see it.'

Varuz frowned. 'Very well.' He turned his horse, led Jezal and his bodyguard off in the direction of the Arches, down routes that were so familiar, and yet so horribly changed. After a few nervous minutes the Lord Marshal pulled up his mount, pointing down a deserted lane to the west. He spoke softly, as though worried the enemy might hear them.

'Arnault's Wall is no more than three hundred strides that way, and the Turkish are crawling on the other side. We really should turn—'

Jezal felt a faint vibration through his saddle, his horse started, dust filtered from the roofs of the houses on one side of the street.

He was just opening his mouth to ask what had happened when the air was ripped open by a thunderous noise. A crushing, terrifying wall of sound that left Jezal's ears humming. Men gasped and gaped. The horses milled and kicked, their eyes rolling with fear. Varuz' mount reared up, dumping the old soldier unceremoniously from his saddle.

Jezal paid him no mind, he was too busy urging his own horse keenly in the direction of the blast, seized by an awful curiosity. Small stones had started raining down, pinging from the roofs and clattering into the road like hailstones. A great cloud of brown dust was rising up into the sky to the west.

'Your Majesty!' came Gorst's plaintive cry. 'We should turn back!' But Jezal took no notice.

He rode out into a wide square, a great quantity of rubble scattered across the broken paving, some of it in chunks big as sheds. As the choking dust slowly settled in an eerie silence, Jezal realised that he knew the place. Knew it well. There was a tavern he had used to visit on the north side, but something was changed – it was more open than it had been . . . his jaw fell. A long stretch of Arnault's Wall had formed the western boundary of the square. Now there was nothing but a yawning crater.

The Gurkish must have dug a mine and filled it with their damned blasting powder. The sun chose that moment to break through the clouds above and Jezal could see all the way across the gaping fissure and into the ruined Arches district. There, crowding at the far edge, clambering down the rubble strewn slope with armour glinting and spears waving, was a sizeable body of Gurkish soldiers.

The first of them were already climbing up out of the crater and into the remains of the shattered square. A few semi-conscious defenders were crawling through the dust, choking and spitting. Others were not moving at all. There was no one to turn the Gurkish back, that Jezal could see. No one but him. He wondered what Harod the Great would have done in this spot.

The answer was not so very hard to find.

Courage can come from many places, and be made of many things, and yesterday's coward can become tomorrow's hero in an instant if the time is right. The giddy flood of bravery which Jezal experienced at that moment consisted largely of guilt and fear, and shame at his fear, swollen by a peevish frustration at nothing having turned out the way he had hoped, and a sudden vague awareness that being killed might solve a great number of irritating problems to which he saw no solution. Not noble ingredients, to be sure. But no one ever asks what the baker put in his pie as long as it tastes well.

He drew his sword and held it up to the sunlight. 'Knights of the Body!' he roared. 'With me!'

Gorst made a despairing grab at his reins. 'Your Majesty! You cannot put yourself in—'

Jezal gave his mount the spurs. It sprang forward with unexpected vigour, and his head snapped painfully back almost causing him to lose his grip on the reins. He rolled in the saddle, hooves hammering, the dirty paving flying by beneath him. He was dimly aware of his escort following, some distance

behind, but his attention was rather drawn to the ever-increasing body of Gurkish soldiers directly ahead.

His horse carried him forwards with gut-churning speed, directly at a man at the very front of the crowd, a standard-bearer with a tall staff, golden symbols shining on it. His bad luck, Jezal supposed, to have been given such a prominent task. The man's eyes went wide as he saw an enormous weight of horse bearing down on him. He flung away his standard and tried to throw himself aside. The edge of Jezal's steel bit deep into his shoulder with the full force of the charge, ripped him open and flung him onto his back. More men went down screaming under the hooves of his mount as it crashed into their midst, he could not have said how many.

Then all was chaos. He sat above a mass of snarling dark faces, glinting armour, jabbing spears. Wood cracked, metal clanged, men shouted words he did not understand. He hacked around him, on one side then the other, yelling mindless curses. A spear tip shrieked along his armoured leg. He chopped at a hand as it seized his reins and a couple of fingers flew off it. Something crunched into his side and nearly threw him from the saddle. His sword caved in a helmet with a hollow bonk and knocked the man under it down into the press of bodies.

Jezal's horse gave a shriek, reared up, twisting. He felt a terrible lurch of fear as he came away from the saddle, the world turning over. He crunched down, dust in his eyes, dust in his mouth, coughing and struggling. He rolled up to his knees. Hooves crashed against the broken ground. Boots slid and stomped. He fumbled in his hair for his circlet, but it must have come off somewhere. How would anyone know he was king? Was he still king? His head was all sticky. A helmet would have been a damn good thing to have brought with him, but it was a little late now. He plucked weakly at the rubble, turned over a flat stone. He had forgotten what he was looking for. He stumbled up, something caught his foot and snatched it painfully away, dumping him on his face again. He waited to have the back of his head broken, but it was only his stirrup, still strapped to his horse's magnificent corpse. He dragged his boot free, gasping for air, reeled a couple of drunken steps under the weight of his armour, his sword dangling from one limp hand.

Someone lifted a curved blade and Jezal stabbed him through the chest. He vomited blood in Jezal's face, fell and twisted the steel from his hand. Something thumped into Jezal's breastplate with a dull clang and knocked him sideways, right into a Gurkish soldier with a spear. He dropped it and they clawed at each other, tottering pointlessly around. Jezal was getting terribly, terribly tired. His head hurt a lot. Just dragging the breath in was a tremendous effort. The whole heroic charge idea seemed as if it had been a bad one. He wanted to lie down.

The Gurkish soldier tore one arm free and raised it up high, a knife clutched in his fist. It flew off at the wrist, a long gout of blood spurting after it. He started to slide to the ground, staring at the stump and wailing. 'The king!' piped Gorst's boyish little voice. 'The king!'

His long steel described a wide arc and whipped the screaming soldier's head away. Another leaped forward, a curved sword raised. Before he got a stride Gorst's heavy blade split his skull wide open. An axe clanged into his

armoured shoulder and he shrugged it away as if it was a fly, chopped the man who had swung it down in a shower of gore. A fourth got the short steel through his neck, staggered forward, eyes bulging, one bloody hand clutched to his throat.

Jeza!l, swaying numbly back and forward, almost felt sorry for the Gurkish. Their numbers might have been impressive from a distance, but close up these men were evidently auxiliaries, thrown forward into the crater as a forlorn hope. They were scrawny, dirty, helplessly disorganised, lightly armed and barely armoured. Many of them, he realised, looked extremely scared. Gorst hacked his way impassively through them like a bull through a flock of sheep, growling as his scything steels opened gaping wounds with sickening fleshy sounds. Other armoured figures crowded in after him, shoving with shields, chopping with their bright swords, clearing a bloody space in the Gurkish crowd.

Gorst's hand slid under Jeza!l's armpit and dragged him backwards, his heels kicking at the rubble. He was vaguely aware that he had dropped his sword somewhere, but it seemed foolish to go looking for it now. Some beggar would no doubt receive a priceless windfall while he hunted among the bodies, later. Jeza!l saw a Knight Herald still mounted, an outline with a winged helmet in the choking dust, his long axe chopping around him.

He was half-carried back, out of the press. Some of the city's regular defenders had regrouped, or were coming in from other parts of the walls. Men with steel caps started to kneel at the lip of the crater, shooting flatbows down into the heaving mass of Gurkish in the bottom, all tangled up with the mud and the rubble. Others dragged up a cart and tipped it onto its side to form a temporary rampart. A Gurkish soldier sobbed as he was cut open, tumbled over the ragged edge of the crater and back down into the mud. More Union flatbows appeared at the edge of the square, more spears. Barrels, masonry, broken spars came with them until an improvised barricade was built up all across the wide gap in Arnault's wall, bristling with men and weapons.

Peppered with bolts and chunks of fallen masonry, the Gurkish faltered, then fell back, scrambling through the debris to their side of the crater and up towards safety, leaving the bottom strewn with corpses.

'To the Agriont, your Majesty,' said Gorst. 'At once.'

Jeza!l made no effort to resist. He had done more than enough fighting for today.

Something strange was happening in the Square of Marshals. Labourers were working at the paving stones with pick and chisel, digging up shallow trenches, apparently at random. Smiths sweated at temporary forges, pouring iron into moulds, lit by the glow of molten metal. The din of clanging hammers and crashing stone was enough to make Jeza!l's teeth hurt, yet somehow the voice of the First of the Magi managed to be louder still.

'No! A circle, dunce, from here to there!'

'I must return to the Halls Martial, your Majesty,' said Varuz. 'Arnault's Wall

is breached. It will not be long until the Gurkish try to push through once again. They would already be at the Middleway if it hadn't been for that charge of yours, though, eh? I see now how you won your reputation in the west! As noble a business as I ever saw!'

'Uh,' Jezal watched the dead being dragged away. Three Knights of the Body, one of Varuz' staff and a page-boy no older than twelve, the last with his head hanging off by a flap of gristle. Three men and a child he had led to their deaths. And that was without even considering the wounds the rest of his faithful entourage had gathered on his behalf. A noble business indeed.

'Wait here,' he snapped at Gorst, then he threaded his way through the sweating workmen towards the First of the Magi. Ferro sat cross-legged nearby on a row of barrels, her hands dangling loose, the same utter contempt she had always shown him written plainly on her dark face. It was almost comforting to see that some things never changed. Bayaz was glaring grimly down into the pages of a large black book, evidently of great age, its leather covers cracked and torn. He looked gaunt and pale, old and withered. One side of his face was covered in scabbed-over scratches.

'What happened to you?' asked Jezal.

Bayaz frowned, a muscle trembling under one dark-ringed eye. 'I could ask you the same question.'

Jezal noted that the Magus had not even bothered with a 'your Majesty'. He touched a hand to the bloody bandage round his skull. 'I was involved in a charge.'

'In a what?'

'The Gurkish brought down a section of Arnault's Wall while I was surveying the city. There was no one to turn them back, and so . . . I did it myself.' He was almost surprised to hear himself saying the words. He was far from proud of the fact, certainly. He had done little more than ride, fall, and hit his head. Bremer dan Gorst and his own dead horse had done the majority of the fighting, and against meagre opposition to boot. But he supposed he had done the right thing, for once, if there was any such a thing.

Bayaz did not agree. 'Have what little brains fate saved for you turned to shit?'

'Have they . . .' Jezal blinked as the meaning of Bayaz' words soaked slowly into his consciousness. 'How dare you, you meddling old turd? You are talking to a king!' That was what he wanted to say, but his head was pounding, and something in the Magus' twitching, wasted face prevented him. Instead he found himself mumbling in a tone almost apologetic. 'But . . . I don't understand. I thought . . . isn't that what Harod the Great would have done?'

'Harod?' Bayaz sneered in Jezal's face. 'Harod was an utter coward, and an utter fathead to boot! That idiot could scarcely dress himself without my help!'

'But—'

'It is easy to find men to lead charges.' The Magus pronounced each word with exaggerated care, as though addressing a simpleton. 'Finding men to lead nations is considerably more difficult. I do not intend that the effort I have put into you should be wasted. Next time you experience a yearning to risk your life, perhaps you might lock yourself in the latrine instead. People respect a man with a fighter's reputation, and that you have been fortunate enough to

have been gifted. People do not respect a corpse. Not there!' roared Bayaz, limping past Jezal and waving one arm angrily at one of the smiths. The poor man started like a frightened rabbit, glowing embers spattering from his crucible. 'I told you, fool! You must follow the charts precisely! Exactly as I have drawn it! One mistake could be worse than fatal!'

Jezal stared after him, outrage, guilt, and simple exhaustion fighting for control of his body. Exhaustion won. He trudged over to the barrels and slumped down next to Ferro.

'Your fucking Majesty,' she said.

He rubbed at his eyes with finger and thumb. 'You do me too much honour with your kind attentions.'

'Bayaz not happy, eh?'

'It seems not.'

'Well. When is that old bastard happy with anything?'

Jezal gave a grunt of agreement. He realised that he had not spoken to Ferro since he was crowned. It was not as though they had been fast friends before, of course, but he had to admit that he was finding her utter lack of deference to him an unexpected tonic. It was almost like being, for a brief moment, the vain, idle, worthless, happy man he used to be. He frowned over at Bayaz, stabbing his finger at something in his old book. 'What ever is he up to, anyway?'

'Saving the world, he tells me.'

'Ah. That. He's left it a little late, don't you think?'

She shrugged. 'I'm not in charge of the timing.'

'How does he plan to do it? With picks and forges?'

Ferro watched him. He still found those devil-yellow eyes as off-putting as ever. 'Among other things.'

Jezal planted his elbows on his knees, his chin drooping down onto his palms, and gave vent to a long sigh. He was so very, very tired. 'I seem to have done the wrong thing,' he muttered.

'Huh.' Ferro's eyes slid away. 'You've got a knack for it.'

Nightfall

General Poulder squirmed in his field chair, moustaches quivering, as though he could only just control his body so overpowering was his fury. His ruddy complexion and snorting breath seemed to imply that he might spring from the tent at any moment and charge the Gurkish positions alone. General Kroy sat rigidly erect on the opposite side of the table, clenched jaw-muscles bulging from the side of his close-cropped skull. His murderous frown clearly demonstrated that his anger at the invader, while no less than anyone else's, was kept under iron command, and if any charging was to be done it would be managed with fastidious attention to detail.

In their first briefings West had found himself outnumbered twenty to one by the two Generals' monstrous staffs. He had reduced them, by a relentless process of attrition, to a meagre two officers a piece. The meetings had lost the charged atmosphere of a tavern brawl and instead taken on the character of a small and bad-tempered family event – perhaps the reading of a disputed will. West was the executor, trying to find an acceptable solution for two squabbling beneficiaries to whom nothing was acceptable. Jalenhorm and Brint, sitting to either side of him, were his dumbstruck assistants. What role the Dogman played in the metaphor it was hard to judge, but he was adding to the already feverish pitch of worry in the tent by picking at his fingernails with a dagger.

'This will be a battle like no other!' Poulder was frothing, pointlessly. 'Never since Harod forged the Union has an invader set foot upon the soil of Midderland!'

Kroy growled his agreement.

'The Gurkish mean to overturn our laws, smother our culture, make slaves of our people! The very future of our nation hangs in the—'

The tent flap snapped back and Pike ducked through, his melted face expressionless. A tall man shuffled behind, stooped over and wobbly with fatigue, a heavy blanket wrapped round his shoulders, his face smeared with dirt.

'This is Fedor dan Hayden,' said Pike. 'A Knight Herald. He was able to swim from the docks in Adua under cover of night, and slip around the Gurkish lines.'

'An action of conspicuous bravery,' said West, to grumbles of grudging agreement from Poulder and Kroy. 'You have all of our thanks. How do things stand inside the city?'

'Frankly, my Lord Marshal, they are dire.' Hayden's voice was scratchy with weariness. 'The western districts – the Arches and the Three Farms – belong to the Emperor. The Gurkish breached Arnault's Wall two days ago, and the defences are stretched to breaking point. At any moment they could burst through, and threaten the Agriont itself. His Majesty asks that you march on

Adua with all possible speed. Every hour could be vital.'

'Does he have any particular strategy in mind?' asked West. Jezal dan Luthar never used to have anything in mind beyond getting drunk and bedding his sister, but he hoped that time might have wrought changes.

'The Gurkish have the city surrounded, but they are spread thin. On the eastern side, particularly. Lord Marshal Varuz believes you could break through with a sharp attack.'

'Though the western districts of the city will still be crawling with Gurkish swine,' growled Kroy.

'Bastards,' whispered Poulder, his jowls twitching. 'Bastards.'

'We have no choice but to march on Adua immediately,' said West. 'We will make use of every road and move with all possible speed to take up a position east of the city, marching by torchlight if necessary. We must assault the Gurkish encirclement at dawn and break their hold on the walls. Admiral Reutzer will meanwhile lead the fleet in an attack against the Gurkish ships in the harbour. General Kroy, order some cavalry forward to scout the way and screen our advance. I want no surprises.'

For once, there was no sign of reluctance. 'Of course, my Lord Marshal.'

'Your division will approach Adua from the north-east, break through the Gurkish lines and enter the city in force, pushing westward towards the Agriont. If the enemy have reached the centre of the city, you will engage them. If not, you will bolster the defences at Arnault's Wall and prepare to flush them from the Arches district.'

Kroy nodded grimly, a single vein bulging on his forehead, his officers like statues of military precision behind him. 'By this time tomorrow, not one Kantic soldier will be left alive in Adua.'

'Dogman, I would like you and your Northmen to support General Kroy's division in their attack. If your . . .' West wrestled with the word, ' . . . king has no objections.'

The Dogman licked his sharp teeth. 'Reckon he'll go whichever way the wind blows. That's always been his style.'

'The wind blows towards Adua tonight.'

'Aye.' The Northman nodded. 'Towards Adua, then.'

'General Poulder, your division will approach the city from the south-east, participate in the battle for the walls, then enter the city in force and move on the docks. If the enemy has made it that far, you will clear them away, then turn northwards and follow the Middleway to the Agriont.'

Poulder hammered the table with his fist, his officers growling like prize-fighters. 'Yes, damn it! We'll paint the streets with Gurkish blood!'

West gave Poulder, and then Kroy, each a hard frown. 'I hardly need to emphasise the importance of victory tomorrow.'

The two Generals rose without a word and moved for the tent flap together. They faced each other before it. For a moment West wondered if, even now, they would fall back into their familiar bickering.

Then Kroy held out his hand. 'The best of luck, General Poulder.'

Poulder seized the hand in both of his. 'And to you, General Kroy. The very best of luck to all of us.' The two of them stepped smartly out into the dusk, their officers following, Jalenhorm and Brint close behind.

Hayden coughed. 'Lord Marshal . . . four other Knights Herald were sent with me. We split up, in the hopes that one of us at least would make it through the Gurkish lines. Have any of the others arrived?'

'No . . . not yet. Perhaps later . . .' West did not think it terribly likely, and neither did Hayden, he could see it in his eyes.

'Of course. Perhaps later.'

'Sergeant Pike will find you some wine and a horse. I imagine you would very much like to see us attack the Gurkish in the morning.'

'I would.'

'Very good.' The two men left the way they had come, and West frowned after them. A shame about the man's comrades, but there would be many more deaths to mourn before tomorrow was done. If there was anyone left to do the mourning. He pushed aside the tent flap and stepped out into the chill air.

The ships of the fleet were anchored in the narrow harbour down below, rocking slowly on the waves, tall masts waving back and forth against the darkening clouds – hard blue, and cold grey, and angry orange. West fancied he could see a few boats crawling closer to the black beach, still ferrying the last of the army to the shore.

The sun was dropping fast towards the horizon, a final muddy flare above the hills in the west. Somewhere under there, just out of sight, Adua was burning. West worked his shoulders round in circles, trying to force the knotted muscles to relax. He had heard no word since before they left Angland. As far as he was aware Ardee was still inside its walls. But there was nothing he could do. Nothing beyond ordering an immediate attack and hoping, against the general run of luck, for the best. He rubbed unhappily at his stomach. He had been suffering with indigestion ever since the sea journey. The pressures of command, no doubt. A few more weeks of it would probably see him vomiting blood over his maps, just like his predecessor. He took a long, ragged breath and blew it out.

'I know how you feel.' It was the Dogman, sitting on a rickety bench beside the tent flap, elbows on his knees, staring down towards the sea.

West sagged down beside him. Briefings with Poulдер and Kroy were always a terrible drain. Play the man of stone for too long and you are left a man of straw. 'I'm sorry,' he found himself saying.

Dogman looked up at him. 'You are? For what?'

'For all of it. For Threetrees, for Tul . . . for Cathil.' West had to swallow an unexpected lump in his throat. 'For all of it. I'm sorry.'

'Ah, we're all sorry. I don't blame you. I don't blame no one, not even Bethod. What good does blame do? We all do what we have to. I gave up looking for reasons a long time ago.'

West thought about that for a moment. Then he nodded. 'Alright.' They sat and watched the torches being lit around the bay below, like glittering dust spreading out across the dark country.

Night time, and a grim one. Grim for the cold, and the drip, drip of thin rain,

and all the hard miles that needed slogging over before dawn. Grim most of all for what waited at the end of it, when the sun came up. Marching to a battle only got harder each time. When Logen had been a young man, before he lost a finger and gained a black reputation, there'd at least been some trace of excitement to it, some shadow of a thrill. Now there was only the sick fear. Fear of the fight, and worse still, fear of the results.

Being king was no kind of help. It was no help to anything, far as he could see. It was just like being chief, but worse. Made him think there was something he should be doing that he wasn't. Made the gap between him and everyone else that bit wider. That bit more unbridgeable.

Boots squelched and sucked, weapons and harness clattered and jingled, men grunted and cursed in the darkness. A few of them had spitting torches now, to light the muddy way, streaks of rain flitting down in the glow around them. The rain fell on Logen too, a feathery kiss at his scalp, and his face, the odd pit and patter on the shoulders of his old coat.

The Union army was spread out down five roads, all heading east, all pointing towards Adua and what sounded like a hard reckoning with the Gurmish. Logen and his crew were on the northernmost one. Off to the south he could see a faint line of flickering lights, floating disembodied in the black country, stretching away out of sight. Another column. Another few thousand men, cursing through the mud towards a bloody dawn.

Logen frowned. He saw the side of Shivers' lean face, up ahead, by the flickering light of a torch, a scowl full of hard shadows, one eye glinting. They watched each other for a moment, then Shivers turned his back, hunched up his shoulders and carried on walking.

'He still don't like me much, that one, and never will.'

'Careless slaughter ain't necessarily the high road to popularity,' said Dogman. 'Especially in a king.'

'But that one there might have the bones to do something about it.' Shivers had a grudge. One that wasn't going away with time, or kindness, or even lives saved. There aren't many wounds that ever heal all the way, and there are some that hurt more with every day that passes.

The Dogman seemed to guess at Logen's thoughts. 'Don't worry about Shivers. He's alright. We've got plenty to worry about with these Gurmish, or whatever.'

'Uh,' said Grim.

Logen wasn't so sure about that. The worst enemies are the ones that live next door, his father always used to tell him. Back in the old days he'd just have murdered the bastard where he stood and problem solved. But he was trying to be a better man now. He was trying hard.

'By the dead, though,' Dogman was saying. 'Fighting against brown men, now, for the Union? How the bloody hell did that all happen? We shouldn't be down here.'

Logen took a long breath, and he let Shivers walk away. 'Furious stuck around for us. Wasn't for him we'd never have been done with Bethod. We owe him. It's just this one last fight.'

'You ever noticed how one fight has a habit of leading on to another? Seems like there's always one fight more.'

'Uh,' said Grim.

'Not this time. This is the last, then we're done.'

'That so? And what happens then?'

'Back to the North, I guess.' Logen shrugged his shoulders. 'Peace, isn't it?'

'Peace?' grunted the Dogman. 'Just what is that, anyway? What do you do with it?'

'I reckon . . . well . . . we'll make things grow, or something.'

'Make things grow? By all the fucking dead! What do you, or I, or any one of us know about making things grow? What else have we done, all our lives, but kill?'

Logen wriggled his shoulders, uncomfortable. 'Got to keep some hope. A man can learn, can't he?'

'Can he? The more you kill, the better you get at it. And the better you get at killing, the less use you are for anything else. Seems to me we've lived this long 'cause when it comes to killing we're the very best there is.'

'You're in a black mood, Dogman.'

'I been in a black mood for years. What worries me is that you ain't. Hope don't much suit the likes of us, Logen. Answer me this. You ever touched a thing that wasn't hurt by it? What have you ever had, that didn't turn to dirt?'

Logen thought about that. His wife and his children, his father and his people, all back to the mud. Forley, Threetrees and Tul. All good folk, and all dead, some of them by Logen's own hand, some of them by his neglect, and his pride, and his foolishness. He could see their faces, now, in his thoughts, and they didn't look happy. The dead don't often. And that was without looking to the dark and sullen crew lurking behind. A crowd of ghosts. A hacked and bloody army. All the folk he'd chosen to kill. Shama Heartless, his guts hanging out of his split stomach. Blacktoe, with his crushed legs and his burned hands. That Finnius bastard, one foot cut off and his chest slashed open. Bethod, even, right at the front with his skull pounded to mush, his frowning face twisted sideways, Crummock's dead boy peering from around his elbow. A sea of murder. Logen squeezed his eyes shut then prised them wide open, but the faces still lingered at the edge of his mind. There was nothing he could say.

'Thought so.' Dogman turned away from him, wet hair dripping round his face. 'You have to be realistic, ain't you always told me? You have to be that.' He strode off up the road, under the cold stars. Grim lingered next to Logen for a moment, then he shrugged his damp shoulders and followed the Dogman, taking his torch with him.

'A man can change,' whispered Logen, not sure whether he was talking to the Dogman, or to himself, or to those corpse-pale faces waiting in the darkness. Men clattered down the track all round him, and yet he stood alone. 'A man can change.'

Questions

A trace of autumn fog had slunk off the restless sea as the sun went down over crippled Adua, turning the chill night ghostly. A hundred strides distant the houses were indistinct. Two hundred and they were spectral, the few lights in the windows floating wraiths, hazy through the gloom. *Good weather for bad work, and we have much of that ahead of us.*

No distant explosions had rattled the still darkness so far. The Gurkish catapults had fallen silent. *At least for the moment, and why not? The city almost belongs to them, and why burn your own city?* Here, on the eastern side of Adua, far from the fighting, all seemed timelessly calm. *Almost as if the Gurkish had never come.* So when a vague clattering filtered through the gloom, as of the boots of a body of well-armed men, Glokta could not help a pang of nervousness, and pressed himself into the deeper shadows against the hedge by the road. Faint, bobbing lights filtered through the murk. Then the outline of a man, one hand resting casually on the pommel of a sword, walking with a loose, strutting slouch that bespoke extreme over-confidence. Something tall appeared to stick from his head, waving with his movements.

Glokta peered into the murk. 'Cosca?'

'The very same!' laughed the Styrian. He was affecting a fine leather cap with a ludicrously tall plume, and he flicked at it with a finger. 'I bought a new hat. Or should I say you bought me one, eh, Superior?'

'So I see.' Glokta glared at the long feather, the flamboyant golden basketwork on the hilt of Cosca's sword. 'I thought we said inconspicuous.'

'In . . . con . . . spicuous?' The Styrian frowned, then shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah, so that was the word. I remember something was said, and I remember I didn't understand it.' He winced, and scratched at his crotch with one hand. 'I think I picked up some passengers from one of those women at the tavern. Little bastards don't half give a man an itch.' *Huh. The women are paid to go there. One might have thought the lice would have better taste.*

A shadowy crowd began to form out of the darkness behind Cosca, a few carrying hooded lanterns. A dozen shaggy outlines, then a dozen more, menace floating silently from each one of them like the stink floating from a turd. 'Are these your men?'

The nearest sported perhaps the worst facial boils that Glokta had ever seen. The man beside him had only one hand, the other having been replaced with a savage-looking hook. A huge fat fellow came next, his pale neck blue with a confusion of badly drawn tattoos. A man almost dwarfish, with a face like a rat and only one eye accompanied him. He had not bothered with a patch, and the socket yawned open under his greasy hair. The list of villainy went on. Two dozen, perhaps, all told, of the most savage-looking criminals Glokta had ever laid eyes on. *And I've laid eyes on a few in my time. Strangers to bathwater, certainly. Not a one of them looks like he wouldn't sell his sister for a mark.* 'They

appear somewhat unreliable,' he murmured.

'Unreliable? Nonsense, Superior! Out of luck is all, and we both know how that goes, no? Why, there's not a man of them I wouldn't trust my mother to.'

'Are you sure?'

'She's been dead these twenty years. What harm could they do her now?' Cosca flung his arm round Glokta's twisted shoulders and drew him close, causing a painful twinge to jab at his hips. 'I'm afraid that pickings are slim.' His warm breath smelled strongly of spirits and corruption. 'Every man not desperate fled the city the moment the Gurmish arrived. But who cares, eh? I hired them for their guts and their sinews, not their looks. Desperate men are the kind I like! We can understand them, no, you and I? Some jobs call for desperate men only, eh, Superior?'

Glokta frowned briefly over that collection of gaunt, of bloated, of scarred and ruined faces. *How could it possibly be that promising Colonel Glokta, dashing commander of the King's Own first regiment, came to be in charge of such a rabble?* He gave a long sigh. *But it is a little late now to be finding fine-looking mercenaries, and I suppose these will fill a pit as well as better. 'Very well. Wait here.'*

Glokta looked up at the dark house as he swung the gate open with his free hand and hobbled through. A chink of light peeped out from between the heavy hangings in the front window. He rapped at the door with the handle of his cane. A pause, then the sound of reluctant footsteps shuffling up the hall.

'Who is it?'

'Me. Glokta.'

Bolts drew back and light spilled out into the chill. Ardee's face appeared, lean-looking, grey round the eyes and pink round the nose. *Like a dying cat.*

'Superior!' She grinned as she took him by the elbow and half-dragged him over the threshold. 'What a delight! Some conversation at last! I'm so toweringly bored.' Several empty bottles were gathered in the corner of the living room, made to glint angrily by smoky candles and a smouldering log in the grate. The table was cluttered with dirty plates and glasses. The place smelled of sweat and wine, old food and new desperation. *Can there be a more miserable occupation than getting drunk on one's own? Wine can keep a happy man happy, on occasion. A sad one it always makes worse.*

'I've been trying to get through this damn book again.' Ardee slapped at a heavy volume lying open, face down, on a chair.

'*The Fall of the Master Maker*,' muttered Glokta. 'That rubbish? All magic and valour, no? I couldn't get through the first one.'

'I sympathise. I'm onto the third and it doesn't get any easier. Too many damn wizards. I get them mixed up one with another. It's all battles and endless bloody journeys, here to there and back again. If I so much as glimpse another map I swear I'll kill myself.'

'Someone might save you the trouble.'

'Eh?'

'I'm afraid you are no longer safe here. You should come with me.'

'Rescue? Thank the fates!' She waved a dismissive hand. 'We've been over this. The Gurmish are away on the other side of the city. You're in more danger in the Agriont I shouldn't—'

'The Gurmish are not the threat. My suitors are.'

'Your gentleman-friends are a threat to me?'

'You underestimate the extent of their jealousy. I fear they will soon become a threat to everyone I have known, friend or enemy, my whole sorry life.' Glokta jerked a hooded cloak from a peg on the wall and held it out to her.

'Where are we going?'

'A charming little house down near the docks. A little past its best, but plenty of character. Like the two of us, you could say.'

There were heavy footsteps in the hallway and Cosca stuck his head into the room. 'Superior, we should leave if we want to reach the docks by—' He stopped, staring at Ardee. There was an uncomfortable silence.

'Who is this?' she murmured.

Cosca pushed flamboyantly into the room, swept off his hat, displaying his scabrous bald patch, and bowed low, low, low. *Any lower and his nose would scrape the floorboards.* 'Forgive me, my lady. Nicomo Cosca, famed soldier of fortune, at your service. Abject, in fact, at your feet.' His throwing knife dropped out of his coat and rattled against the boards.

They all stared at it for a moment, then Cosca grinned up. 'You see that fly, against the wall?'

Glokta narrowed his eyes. 'Perhaps not the best moment for—'

The blade spun across the room, missed the target by a stride, hit the wall handle-first and gouged out a lump of plaster, bounced back and clattered across the floor.

'Shit,' said Cosca. 'I mean . . . damn.'

Ardee frowned down at the knife. 'I'd say shit.'

Cosca passed it off with a rotten smile. 'I must be dazzled. When the Superior described to me your beauty I thought he must have . . . how do you say . . . exaggerated? Now I see that he came short of the mark.' He retrieved his knife and jammed his hat back on, slightly askew. 'Please allow me to declare myself in love.'

'What did you tell him?' asked Ardee.

'Nothing.' Glokta sucked sourly at his gums. 'Master Cosca has a habit of overstating the case.'

'Especially when in love,' threw in the mercenary. 'Especially then. When I fall in love, I fall hard, and, as a rule, I do it no more than once a day.'

Ardee stared at him. 'I don't know whether to feel flattered or scared.'

'Why not be both?' said Glokta. 'But you will have to do it on the way.' *We are short of time, and I have a rank garden to weed.*

The gate came open with an agonised shrieking of rusted metal. Glokta lurched over the decaying threshold, his leg, his hip, his back all stabbing at him from the long limp to the docks. The ruined mansion loomed out of the gloom at the far end of the shattered courtyard. *Like a mighty mausoleum. A suitable tomb for all my dead hopes.* Severard and Frost waited in the shadows on the broken steps, dressed all in black and masked, as usual. *But not at all alike.* A burly man and a slender, one white haired and one dark, one standing,

arms folded, the other sitting, cross-legged. *One is loyal, the other . . . we shall find out.*

Severard unravelled himself and got up with the usual grin around his eyes. 'Alright, chief, so what's all the—'

Cosca stepped through the gate and wandered lazily across the broken paving, tapping a few lumps of masonry away with the toe of one shabby boot. He stopped beside a ruined fountain and scraped some muck out of it with a finger. 'Nice place. Nice and . . .' He waved the finger around, and the muck with it. 'Crumbly.' His mercenaries were already spreading out slowly around the rubble-strewn courtyard. Patched coats and tattered cloaks twitched back to display weapons of every size and shape. Edges, points, spikes and flanges glinted in the shifting light from their lanterns, their steel as smooth and clean as their faces were rough and dirty.

'Who the hell are these?' asked Severard.

'Friends.'

'They don't look too friendly.'

Glokta showed his Practical the yawning hole in his front teeth. 'Well. I suppose that all depends whose side you're on.'

The last traces of Severard's smile had vanished. His eyes flickered nervously around the yard. *The eyes of the guilty. How well we know them. We see them on our prisoners. We see them in the mirror, when we dare to look. One might have hoped for better from a man of his experience, but holding the blade is a poor preparation for being cut by it. I should know.* Severard dashed towards the house, quick as a rabbit, but he only got a step before a heavy white hand chopped into the side of his neck and flung him senseless on the broken paving.

'Take him downstairs, Frost. You know the way.'

'Dowthairth. Unh.' The hulking albino dragged Severard's limp body over his shoulder and set off towards the front door.

'I have to say,' said Cosca, flicking the scum carelessly off his finger, 'that I like your way with your men, Superior. Discipline, I've always admired it.'

'Fine advice from the least disciplined man in the Circle of the World.'

'I have learned all kinds of things from my many mistakes.' Cosca stretched his chin up and scratched at his scabby neck. 'The one thing I never learn is to stop making them.'

'Huh,' grunted Glokta as he laboured up the steps. *A curse we all have to bear. Round and round in circles we go, clutching at successes that we never grasp, endlessly tripping over the same old failures. Truly, life is the misery we endure between disappointments.*

They stepped through the empty doorway and into the deeper darkness of the entrance hall. Cosca held his lamp high, staring up towards the ragged roof, his boots squelching heedless in the bird droppings spattering the floor. 'A palace!' His voice echoed back from the shattered staircases, the empty doorways, the naked rafters high above.

'Please make yourselves comfortable,' said Glokta. 'But out of sight, perhaps. We can expect visitors some time tonight.'

'Excellent. We love company, don't we lads?'

One of Cosca's men gave a wet-lunged chuckle, displaying two rows of shit-

coloured teeth. *A set so incredibly rotten I am almost glad to have my own.* 'These visitors will come from his Eminence the Arch Lector. Perhaps you could take a firm hand with them, while I'm downstairs?'

Cosca glanced round approvingly at the crumbling hall. 'A nice place for a warm welcome. I'll let you know when our guests have been. I doubt they'll stay long.'

Ardee had found a place near the wall, her hood up, her eyes on the floor. *Trying to fade into the plaster, and who could blame her? Hardly the most pleasant company for a young woman, or the most reassuring setting. But better than a slit throat, I suppose.* Glokta held his hand out to her. 'It would be best if you were to come with me.'

She hesitated. As though not entirely *sure that it would, in fact, be best to come with me.* But a brief glance at some of the ugliest men in one of the world's ugliest professions evidently persuaded her. Cosca handed her his lamp, making sure his fingers lingered on hers for an uncomfortably long moment.

'Thank you,' she said, jerking her hand away.

'My particular pleasure.'

Sheets of hanging paper, broken laths, lumps of fallen plaster cast strange shadows as they left Cosca and his thugs behind and picked their way into the guts of the dead building. Doorways passed by, squares of blackness, yawning like graves.

'Your friends seem a charming crowd,' murmured Ardee.

'Oh indeed, the brightest stars in the social firmament. Some tasks demand desperate men, apparently.'

'You must have some truly desperate work in mind, then.'

'When don't I?'

Their lamp barely lit the rotting drawing room, panelling sagging from the cheap brickwork, the best part of the floor a single festering puddle. The hidden door stood open in the far wall and Glokta shuffled round the edge of the room towards it, his hips burning with the effort.

'What did your man do?'

'Severard? He let me down.' *And we will soon find out how badly.*

'I hope I never let you down, then.'

'You, I am sure, have better sense. I should go first, then if I fall at least I fall alone.' He winced his way down the steps while she followed with the light.

'Ugh. What's that smell?'

'The sewers. There's an entrance to them down here, somewhere.' Glokta stepped past the heavy door and into the converted wine cellar, the bright steel grilles on the cells to either side glimmering as they passed, the whole place reeking of damp and fear.

'Superior!' came a voice from the darkness. Brother Longfoot's desperate face appeared, pressed up against one set of bars.

'Brother Longfoot, my apologies! I have been so very busy. The Gurkish have laid siege to the city.'

'Gurkish?' squeaked the man, his eyes bulging. 'Please, if you release me—'

'Silence!' hissed Glokta in a voice that brooked no dallying. 'You should stay

here.'

Ardee glanced nervously towards the Navigator's cell. 'Here?'

'He isn't dangerous. I think you'll be more comfortable than you would be . . .' and he nodded his head towards the open doorway at the end of the vaulted hall, 'in there.'

She swallowed. 'Alright.'

'Superior, please!' One despairing arm stuck from Longfoot's cell, 'please, when will you release me? Superior, please!' Glokta shut the door on his begging with a gentle click. *We have other business today, and it will not wait.*

Frost already had Severard manacled to the chair beside the table, still unconscious, and was lighting the lamps one by one with a flaming taper. The domed chamber gradually grew bright, the colour leaking into the mural across the round walls. Kanedias frowned down, arms outstretched, the fire burning behind him. *Ah, our old friend the Master Maker, always disapproving.* Opposite him his brother Juvens still bled his lurid last across the wall. *And not the only blood that will be spilled in here tonight, I suspect.*

'Urr,' groaned Severard, his lank hair swaying. Glokta lowered himself slowly into his chair, the leather creaking under him. Severard grunted again, his head dropped back, eyelids flickering. Frost lumbered over, reached out and undid the buckles on Severard's mask, pulled it off and tossed it away into the corner of the room. From a fearsome *Practical of the Inquisition* to . . . *nothing much.* He stirred, wrinkled his nose, twitching like a boy asleep.

Young. Weak. Helpless. One could almost feel sorry for him, if one had a heart. But now is not the time for sentiment and soft feelings, for friendship and forgiveness. The ghost of happy and promising Colonel Sand dan Glokta has been clinging to me for far too long. Farewell, my old friend. You cannot help us today. Now is the time for the ruthless Superior Glokta to do what he does best. To do the only thing that he does well. Now is the time for hard heads, hard hearts and even harder edges.

Time to cut the truth out.

Frost jabbed Severard in the stomach with two fingers and his eyes snapped open. He jerked in his chair, the manacles rattling. He saw Glokta. He saw Frost. His eyes went wide as they darted round the room. They went wider still when he realised where he was. He snorted in air, the quick, hard breath of abject terror, the greasy strands of hair across his face blowing this way and that with the force of it. And how will we begin?

'I know . . .' he croaked. 'I know I told that woman who you were . . . I know . . . but I had no choice.' *Ah, the wheedling. Every man, more or less, behaves the same way when he's chained to a chair.* 'What could I do? She would've fucking killed me! I had no choice! Please—'

'I know what you told her, and I know you had no choice.'

'Then . . . then why—'

'Don't give me that, Severard. You know why you're here.' Frost stepped forward, as impassive as ever, and lifted the lid on Glokta's wonderful case. The trays inside opened up like an exotic flower, proffering out the polished handles, the gleaming needles, the shining blades of his instruments.

Glokta puffed out his cheeks. 'I had a good day, today. I woke up clean, and made it to the bath on my own. Not too much pain.' He wrapped his fingers

around the grip of the cleaver. 'Something to celebrate, a good day. I get so very few of them.' He slid it from its sheath, the heavy blade flashing in the harsh lamplight. Severard's eyes followed it all the way, bulging with fear and fascination, beads of sweat glittering on his pale forehead.

'No,' he whispered. Yes. Frost unlocked the cuff around Severard's left wrist, lifted his arm in both meaty hands. He took the fingers and spread them out one by one until they were flattened on the wood in front of him, wrapping his other arm around Severard's shoulders in a tight embrace.

'I think we can dispense with the preamble.' Glokta rocked forward, got up and limped slowly around the table, his cane clicking on the tiles, his left leg dragging behind it, the corner of the cleaver's blade scraping gently across the wood of the table-top. 'I need not explain how this will work to you. You, who have assisted me so very ably, on so very many occasions. Who could know better how we will proceed?'

'No,' whimpered Severard, trying half a desperate smile, but with a tear leaking from the corner of his eye nonetheless. 'No, you wouldn't! Not to me! You wouldn't!'

'Not to you?' Glokta gave a sad smile of his own. 'Oh, Practical Severard, please . . .' He let the grin slowly fade as he lifted the cleaver. 'You know me so much better than that.'

Bang! The heavy blade flashed down and hacked into the table-top, paring the slightest sliver of skin from the end of Severard's middle finger.

'No!' he squawked. 'No!' *You don't admire my precision any longer, then?*

'Oh, yes, yes.' Glokta tugged at the smooth handle and dragged the blade free. 'How did you think this would end? You've been talking. You've been saying things you shouldn't, to people you had no business saying anything to. You will tell me what. You will tell me who.' The cleaver glimmered as he raised it again. 'And you had better tell me soon.'

'No!' Severard thrashed and wriggled in the chair but Frost had him as tightly as a fly in honey. Yes.

The blade sliced cleanly through the end of Severard's middle finger and took it off at the first joint. The end of his index finger spun across the wood. The tip of his ring finger stayed where it was, wedged into a joint in the table top. With Frost's hand still clamped tight as a vice round his wrist the blood only dribbled gently from the three wounds and spread out in slow rivulets down the grain.

There was a breathless pause. *One, two, three . . .* Severard screamed. He wailed, and jerked, and trembled, his face quivering. *Painful, eh? Welcome to my world.*

Glokta worked his aching foot around in his boot. 'Who would ever have thought that our charming association, so enjoyable and profitable to us both, could possibly end like this? Not my choice. Not mine. Tell me who you spoke to. Tell me what you said. Then this unpleasantness will all be over. Otherwise . . .'

Bang! The end of his little finger, now, and three more pieces of the rest. His middle finger was down to the knuckle, almost. Severard stared, his eyes wide with horror, his breath coming in short, fast gasps. *Shock, amazement, stunned terror.* Glokta leaned down to his ear. 'I hope you weren't planning to take up

the violin, Severard. You'll be lucky if you can play a fucking gong by the time we're done here.' He winced at a spasm in his neck as he lifted the cleaver again.

'Wait!' sobbed Severard. 'Wait! Valint and Balk! The bankers! I told them . . . I told them . . .'

I knew it. 'What did you tell them?'

'That you were still looking for Raynault's murderer when we'd already hung the Emperor's emissary!' Glokta met Frost's eyes, and the albino stared back, emotionless. *And another secret is dragged kicking into the merciless light. How disappointingly right I was. It always amazes me, how swiftly problems can be solved, once you start cutting things off people.* 'And . . . and . . . I told them that you wanted to know about our bastard king, and about Bayaz, and I told them you weren't checking up on Sult like they asked, and I told them . . . I told them . . .'

Severard stuttered to a halt, staring at the remains of his fingers, scattered out across the table in a spreading slick of blood. *That mixture of unbearable pain, even more unbearable loss, and total disbelief. Am I dreaming? Or have I really lost half my fingers, forever?*

Glokta nudged Severard with the end of the cleaver. 'What else?'

'I told them anything I could. I told them . . . everything I knew . . .' The words came spitting and drooling from his lips, curled back with agony. 'I had no choice. I had debts, and . . . they offered to pay. I had no choice!'

Valint and Balk. Debts, and blackmail, and betrayal. How horribly banal it all is. That's the trouble with answers. They're never as exciting as the questions, somehow. Glokta's lips twitched into a sad smile. 'No choice. I know exactly how you feel.' He lifted the cleaver again.

'But—'

Bang! The heavy blade scraped against the table-top as Glokta swept four more neat slices of flesh carefully out of the way. Severard screamed, and gasped, and screamed some more. Desperate, slobbering screams, his face screwed up tight. *Just like the prunes I sometimes have for breakfast.* He still had half his little finger, but the other three were nothing more than oozing stumps. *But we cannot stop now, not after we have come so far. We cannot stop for anything, can we? We must know it all.*

'What about the Arch Lector?' asked Glokta, stretching his neck to the side and working his stiff shoulder. 'How did he know what went on in Dagoska? What did you tell him?'

'How did he . . . what . . . I told him nothing! I told him—'

Bang! Severard's thumb flew off, spinning across the table, leaving behind a spiralling trail of bloody spots. Glokta worked his hips back and forth, trying to wriggle out of the aches down his legs, the aches up his back. *But there is no escaping them. Every possible position, a little worse than the one before.* 'What did you tell Sult?'

'I . . . I . . .' Severard stared up, his mouth hanging open, a long string of drool dangling from his bottom lip. 'I . . .'

Glokta frowned. *That is not an answer.* 'Tie it off at the wrist and get the other hand ready. We've nothing left to work with here.'

'No! No! Please . . . I didn't . . . please . . .' *How I tire of the pleading. The*

words 'no' and 'please' lose all meaning after half an hour of this. They begin to sound like a sheep bleating. We are all lambs to the slaughter, in the end. He stared at the pieces of finger scattered across the bloody table. *Meat for the butcher.* Glokta's head hurt, the room was too bright. He put the cleaver down and rubbed at his sore eyes. *A draining business, mutilating your closest friends.* He realised he had smeared blood across his eyelids. *Damn it.*

Frost had already tightened a tourniquet round Severard's wrist and manacled the bloody remains of his left hand back to the chair. He unfastened his right arm and guided it carefully to the table. Glokta watched him do it. *All neat, and business-like, and ruthlessly efficient. Does his conscience nag at him, I wonder, when the sun goes down? I doubt it. I give the orders after all. And I act on orders from Sult, on advice from Marovia, on the demands of Valint and Balk. What choice do any of us have, in the end? Why, the excuses almost make themselves.*

Frost's white face was dusted with bloody red specks as he spread Severard's right hand out on the table, just where the left one had been. He did not even struggle this time. *You lose the will, after a while. I remember.* 'Please . . .' he whispered.

It would be so very nice to stop. Most likely the Gurmish will burn the whole city and kill us all, and then who will care who told who what? If by some miracle they fail, no doubt Sult will finish me, or Valint and Balk will collect their debt in my blood. What will it matter when I am floating face-down in the docks whether certain questions were ever answered? Then why do I do this? Why?

The blood reached the edge of the wood and started dripping to the floor with a steady tap, tap, tap. No other answer. Glokta felt a flurry of twitches run up the side of his face. He took hold of the cleaver again.

'Look at this.' He gestured at the pieces of bloody flesh scattered across the table. 'Look what you've lost here, already. All because you won't tell me what I need to know. Do you not value your own fingers? They're no use to you now, are they? They're no use to me, I can tell you that. They're no use to anyone, besides a hungry dog or two, maybe.' Glokta bared the yawning hole in his front teeth, and ground the point of the cleaver into the wood between Severard's outspread fingers. 'One more time.' He pronounced the words with icy precision. 'What . . . did you tell . . . his Eminence?'

'I . . . told him . . . nothing!' The tears ran down Severard's hollow cheeks, his chest shuddered with sobs. 'I told him nothing! Valint and Balk, I had no choice! I've never spoken to Sult in my fucking life! Not a word! Never!'

Glokta looked into his Practical's eyes, his prisoner's eyes, for a long moment, trying to see the truth. All was silent except for Severard's gurgling, agonised breath. Then Glokta wrinkled his lip and tossed the cleaver down rattling on the table. *Why give up your other hand, when you have confessed already?* He gave a long sigh, reached out and gently wiped the tears from Severard's pale face. 'Alright. I believe you.'

But what then? We are left with more questions than before, and nowhere to look for the answers. He arched his back, wincing at the aches in his twisted spine, down his twisted leg, through his toeless foot. *Sult must have gained his information elsewhere. Who else survived Dagoska, who else saw enough? Eider? She would never dare reveal herself. Vitari? If she wanted to spill her guts she could*

have done it at the time. Cosca? His Eminence would never work with a man that unpredictable. I only use him myself because I have no other choice. Then who?

Glokta's eyes met Frost's. Pink eyes, unblinking. They stared at him, bright and hard as pink gemstones. And the wheels clicked into place.

I see.

Neither one of them spoke. Frost reached out, without much haste, his eyes never leaving Glokta's, and wrapped both his thick arms around Severard's neck. The ex-Practical could only stare, helpless.

'What're—' Frost frowned slightly. There was a sharp crunching sound as he wrenched Severard's head sideways. *As simple and careless as killing a chicken.* Severard's skull flopped backwards as Frost let him go, and far past backwards, unnatural knobbly shapes sticking from the pale skin of his twisted neck.

The albino stood up, between Glokta and the door, hanging ajar. No way out. Glokta winced as he stumbled backwards, the tip of his cane scraping against the floor. 'Why?' Frost came on, slowly and surely, his white fists clenched tight, his white face expressionless behind his mask. Glokta held up one hand. 'Just tell me why, damn it!'

The albino shrugged. *I suppose some questions have no answers, after all.* Glokta's twisted back hit the curved wall. And my time is up. Ah well. He took a long breath. *The odds were always stacked against me. I do not mind dying, so very much.*

Frost raised his white fist, then grunted. The cleaver sank deep into his heavy shoulder with a dull smack. Blood began to leak out from it into his shirt. Frost turned. Ardee stood behind him. The three of them stared at each other for a moment. Then Frost punched her in the face. She reeled away and crashed into the side of the table, slid limp to the floor, dragging it over on its side, Glokta's case clattering down beside her, instruments tumbling, blood and bits of flesh scattering. Frost started to turn back, the cleaver still wedged in his flesh, his left arm hanging limp.

Glokta's lips curled away from his empty gums. *I do not mind dying. But I refuse to be beaten.*

He set his feet as best he could, ignoring the pain that stabbed through his toeless foot and up his front leg. He brought up his cane and jammed his thumb into its hidden catch. It had been made to his precise instructions by the same man who had made the case for his instruments. *And is an even finer piece of craftsmanship.*

There was a gentle click as the wood sprang open on secret hinges and dropped away revealing a two-foot needle of mirror-bright metal. He let go a piercing shriek.

Jab, jab, Glokta. Jab, jab.

The steel was a blur. The first thrust ran Frost neatly through the left side of his chest. The second darted silently through the right side of his neck. The third punctured his mask and scraped against his jaw bone, the glinting point showing itself just under his white ear for an instant before it whipped back out.

Frost stood, motionless, his white eyebrows going up with mild surprise. Then blood welled from the tiny wound on his throat and ran down into his

shirt in a black line. He reached out with one big white hand. He wobbled, blood bubbling from under his mask.

‘Futh,’ he breathed.

He crumpled to the ground as though his legs had been snatched suddenly from under him. He put out an arm to push himself up, but there was no strength in it. His breaths gurgled noisily, then quietly, and he was still. *And that is all.*

Ardee was sitting up near the table, blood running out of her nose and down her top lip. ‘He’s dead.’

‘I used to fence,’ murmured Glokta. ‘It seems the trick never entirely leaves you.’ He stared from one corpse to the other. Frost lay in a slowly widening dark pool, one pink eye staring ahead, still unblinking, even in death. Severard’s head was hanging back over the chair, mouth yawning wide open in a silent scream, his mutilated hand still manacled, the other hanging limp. *My boys. My eyes. My hands. All finished.* He frowned at the bloody length of metal in his fist. *Well. We must fumble onwards as best we can without them.*

He winced as he reached down and picked up the fallen piece of his cane between two fingers, snapped it shut around the bloody steel. ‘If you wouldn’t mind closing that case for me.’ Ardee stared wide-eyed at the instruments, at Severard’s yawning corpse, at the blood-stained table on its side and the fragments of flesh scattered across the floor. She coughed, and pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. *One forgets that some people are not used to dealing with these matters. But we need such help as we can get, and it is a little late for easing anyone into this gently. If she can chop into a man with a cleaver, she can carry a blade or two for me without swooning.* ‘The case,’ he snapped. ‘I will still need my instruments.’

Ardee blinked, collected the few scattered tools with trembling hands and put them back in their places. She wedged the box under her arm and stood up, somewhat unsteadily, wiping the blood from her nose on her white sleeve. Glokta noticed that she had a piece of one of Severard’s fingers caught in her hair.

‘You have something . . .’ he pointed at his head, ‘just here.’

‘What? Gah!’ She tore the dead thing out and flung it on the ground, gave a shiver of disgust. ‘You should find another way to make a living.’

‘I have been thinking that for some time. But there are still a few more questions I must have answered.’

The door creaked and Glokta felt a sudden stab of panic. Cosca stepped through into the room. He whistled softly as he surveyed the carnage, pushed his cap back on his head, its feather casting a spray of long shadows across the mural behind him. ‘You’ve made quite a mess, Superior, quite a mess.’

Glokta fingered his cane. His leg was on fire, his heart was thumping dully at his temples, he was damp with cold sweat under his scratchy clothes. ‘Unavoidable.’

‘I thought you’d want to know that we had our visitors. Six Practicals of the Inquisition. I rather suspect they may have been sent here to kill you.’ *Undoubtedly. On the Arch Lector’s orders, acting on information from the late Practical Frost.*

‘And?’ asked Glokta. After the events of the past hour he was almost

expecting Cosca to come at him, sword swinging.

But if the last hour has taught us anything, it is that the least trusted henchman is not always the least reliable. ‘And we cut them to pieces, of course.’ The Styrian grinned. ‘I’m insulted you might think otherwise.’

‘Good. Good.’ *At least something has gone to plan.* Glokta wanted nothing more than to slide to the floor and lie there, screaming. But there is work to do. He winced as he limped for the door. ‘We need to head for the Agriont immediately.’

The first traces of dawn were leaking into the cold, clear sky as Glokta hobbled out onto the Middleway, Ardee at his shoulder. There was still mist on the air, but it was fading, now. *A fine day in prospect, it would appear. A fine day for bloodshed, treachery, and—*

Shapes were moving in the mist, away south down the wide cobbled road, towards the sea. There were noises too. Rattling, jingling. It sounded very much like a body of armoured men on the move. Further off, someone was shouting. A bell began to clang, sullen and muffled. A warning bell.

Cosca frowned into the thinning mist. ‘What is that?’

The shapes grew more distinct. Armoured men, carrying spears, and in numbers. Their tall helmets were plainly not of Union design.

Ardee touched Glokta on the arm. ‘Are they—’

‘Gurkish.’ Their armour glinted in the thin, grey light as the fog drifted aside. A vast body of them, marching north up the Middleway. *They must finally have landed men at the docks, broken through into the centre of the city. What astonishingly poor timing.* ‘Back!’ Glokta turned towards the alley, slipped and nearly fell, grimacing as Ardee caught him by the elbow and dragged him up straight.

‘Back to the mansion!’ *And hope we weren’t seen already.* ‘And keep those lamps with you, we’ll need them.’ He hurried to the stinking alley as best he could, barged and jostled by Cosca’s mercenaries.

‘Damn these Gurkish,’ hissed the Styrian. ‘I don’t know for the life of me what I did to upset them so.’

‘You have my sympathy.’ The gate squealed shut and a couple of the mercenaries started dragging a broken fountain behind it. *I’m not sure how long that will keep out one of the Emperor’s legions.*

‘Might I ask what the plan is now, exactly, Superior? Charming though your palace is, sitting here and waiting for relief would hardly seem to be an option.’

‘No.’ Glokta struggled up the steps and through the open front door. ‘We need to get to the Agriont.’

‘Something tells me our Gurkish friends will have had the same idea. We will not be getting there overground, that is certain.’

‘Then we must go underground.’ Glokta limped into the guts of the building as smartly as he could, Ardee and the mercenaries following behind in a worried crowd. ‘There is an entrance to the sewers here. One can get all the way to the Agriont, if one knows the route.’

‘Sewers?’ Cosca grinned. ‘I like nothing more than wading through life’s filth, as you well know, but sewers can be quite . . . confusing. Do you know the route?’

‘Actually, no.’ *But I know a man who says he can find a way through anything, even a river of shit.* ‘Brother Longfoot!’ he called out as he hobbled towards the steps. ‘I have a proposition for you!’

The Day of Judgement

Lord Marshal West stood in the shadow of an abandoned barn, up on a rise above the fertile plains of Midderland, his eye-glass clutched tightly in one gloved hand. There was still a trace of morning mist clinging to the flat autumn fields – patchworks of brown, green, yellow, stabbed with trees, slashed with bare hedgerows. In the distance West could see the outermost walls of Adua, a stern grey line pimpled with towers. Behind, in a lighter grey, the vague shapes of buildings jutted skywards. Above them loomed the towering ghost of the House of the Maker, stark and unrepentant. All in all, it was a grim homecoming.

There was not so much as a breath of wind. The crisp air was strangely still. Just as if there was no war, no rival armies drawing up, no bloody battles scheduled to begin. West swept his eye-glass back and forth, but he could scarcely see any hint of the Gurmish. Perhaps he imagined a tiny fence, down there before the walls, perhaps the outlines of pin-prick spears, but at this distance, in this light, he could be sure of nothing.

‘They must be expecting us. They must be.’

‘Maybe they’re sleeping late,’ said Jalenhorm, ever the optimist.

Pike was more direct. ‘What difference if they are?’

‘Not much,’ West admitted. King Jezal’s orders had been specific. The city was infested with Gurmish troops and the defences were close to complete collapse. There was no time for clever stratagems, for careful approaches, for probing the enemy for weak spots. Prince Ladisla, ironically, would probably have been as good a commander for this particular situation as anyone else. For once, circumstances called for a magnificent charge, followed closely by death or glory. The only thing under West’s control was the timing.

Brint pulled up his horse nearby, sending a shower of grit into the cold air. He swung down from the saddle and gave a smart salute. ‘General Kroy’s cavalry is in position on the right wing, Lord Marshal, and ready to charge at your order.’

‘Thank you, Captain. His foot?’

‘Perhaps halfway to deploying. Some companies are still spread out down the roads.’

‘Still?’

‘Muddy-going, sir.’

‘Huh.’ Armies left mud behind them like a slug left a trail. ‘What about Poulder?’

‘A similar position, as far as I can tell,’ said Brint. ‘No messages?’

Jalenhorm shook his head. ‘General Poulder has not been forthcoming this morning.’

West stared towards the city, that distant grey line beyond the fields. ‘Soon.’ He chewed at his lip, already raw from his constant worrying. ‘Very soon.’

Mustn't let fly half-drawn. When a little more of the foot comes up . . .'

Brint was frowning off to the south. 'Sir, is that . . .?' West followed his pointing finger. Over on the left wing, where Poulder had been gathering his division, the cavalry were already moving smartly forward.

West stared as the riders gathered pace. 'What the . . .'

Two full regiments of heavy horse broke into a majestic gallop. Thousands of them, streaming forwards across the open farmland, surging round the trees and the scattered farmhouses, throwing up a wake of dusty earth. West could hear the hammering of their hooves now, like distant thunder, could almost feel the vibration of it through his boots. The sun glinted on raised sword and lance, on shield and full armour. Banners streamed and snapped in the wind. It was quite the display of martial grandeur. A scene from a lurid storybook with a muscular hero in which meaningless words like honour and righteousness were often repeated.

'Shit,' growled West through gritted teeth, feeling the familiar pulsing coming up behind his eyes. General Poulder had been itching to mount one of his fabled cavalry charges all across the North and back. There the harsh terrain, or the harsh weather, or the harsh circumstances had all prevented it. Now, with the perfect conditions, it seemed he had been unable to resist the opportunity.

Jalenhorm slowly shook his head. 'Bloody Poulder.'

West gave a snarl of frustration, raised up his eye-glass to dash it on the ground. He managed to stop himself at the last moment, forced in a heavy breath, and slapped the thing angrily closed. He could not afford to indulge himself today. 'Well, that's it then, isn't it? Order the charge, all across the line!'

'Sound the charge!' roared Pike. 'The charge!'

The sharp bugle call rang out, blaringly loud on the chill morning air, doing nothing to ease West's throbbing headache. He stuck one muddy boot in his stirrup and dragged himself reluctantly up into his saddle, already sore from riding all night. 'I suppose we must follow General Poulder to glory. At a less honourable distance, though, perhaps. Someone still needs to co-ordinate this shambles.' The sounds of answering bugles further down the line floated up to them, and on the right Kroy's horsemen began to trot forwards.

'Major Jalenhorm, order the foot forward in support as soon as they come up,' West worked his mouth. 'Piecemeal if need be.'

'Of course, Lord Marshal.' The big man was already turning his horse to give the orders.

'War,' muttered West. 'A noble business.'

'Sir?' asked Pike.

'Nothing.'

Jeza! took the last few steps two at a time, Gorst and a dozen of his Knights clattering after him, sticking to his heels as tightly as his shadow. He swept imperiously past the guard and into the bright morning light at the top of the Tower of Chains, high above the stricken city. Lord Marshal Varuz was already

at the parapet, surrounded by a gaggle of his staff, all glaring out across Adua. The old soldier stood stiffly, his hands clasped behind him, just the way he had always done at fencing practice, long ago. Jezal had never noticed his hands shake in the old days, however. They shook now, and badly. High Justice Marovia stood beside him, black robes stirred by the gentle breeze.

‘The news?’ demanded Jezal.

The Lord Marshal’s tongue darted nervously over his lips. ‘The Gurkish mounted an assault before dawn. The defenders of Arnault’s wall were overwhelmed. Not long afterwards they managed to land men at the docks. A great number of men. We have been fighting a rearguard action with the greatest courage, but . . . well . . .’

There was really no need to say more. As Jezal moved closer to the parapet, and wounded Adua came into view, he could plainly see the Gurkish flooding down the Middleway, the tiny golden standards of the Emperor’s legions bobbing above the mass of humanity like flotsam on a glittering tide. Like seeing one ant on the carpet, then gradually becoming aware of hundreds all across his living room, Jezal began to notice movement elsewhere, then everywhere. The very centre of the city was infested with Gurkish soldiers.

‘Fighting a rearguard action with . . . mixed success,’ finished Varuz lamely.

Down below, a few men burst out from the buildings near the western gate of the Agriont, ran across the cobbled square before the moat, heading for the bridge.

‘Gurkish?’ someone squealed.

‘No,’ muttered the Lord Marshal. ‘Those are ours.’ Men doing their very best to escape the slaughter that was no doubt taking place down in the ruined city. Jezal had faced death often enough to guess at how they felt.

‘Have those men brought to safety,’ he said, voice cracking slightly.

‘I am afraid . . . the gates have been sealed, your Majesty.’

‘Then unseal them!’

Varuz’ dewy eyes wandered nervously to Marovia. ‘That would . . . not be wise.’

A dozen or more had made it to the bridge now, were shouting and waving their arms. Their words were lost over the distance, but the tone of helpless, abject terror was impossible to miss.

‘We should do something.’ Jezal’s hands gripped tight to the parapet. ‘We must do something! There will be others out there, many more!’

Varuz cleared his throat. ‘Your Majesty—’

‘No! Have my horse saddled. Gather the Knights of the Body. I refuse to—’

High Justice Marovia had moved to block the door to the stairs, and now looked calmly, sadly into Jezal’s face. ‘If you were to open the gates now, you would be putting everyone in the Agriont at risk. Many thousands of citizens, all looking to you for protection. Here we can keep them safe, at least for now. We must keep them safe.’ His eyes slid sideways to the streets. Different-coloured eyes, Jezal noticed, one blue, one green. ‘We must weigh the greater good.’

‘The greater good.’ Jezal looked the other way, into the Agriont. Brave defenders were ranged around the walls, he knew, ready to fight to the death for king and country, however undeserving. He pictured civilians too,

scurrying for safety through the narrow lanes. Men, women, children, the old and the young, driven from their ruined homes. People to whom he had promised safety. His eyes flickered across the high white buildings around the green park, the wide Square of Marshals, the long Kingsway with its tall statues. They were filled, he knew, with the helpless and the needy. Those unlucky enough to have no one better to rely on than the gutless fraud, Jezal dan Luthar.

It stuck in his throat, but he knew the old bureaucrat was right. There was nothing he could do. He had been shockingly lucky to survive his last magnificent charge, and it was far too late for another. Outside the Agriont, Gurkish soldiers were beginning to boil into the square before the gate. A few of them knelt, bows in hand, and sent a flight of arrows arcing across onto the bridge. Tiny figures tumbled and fell, splashed into the moat. Tiny screams wafted gently up to the top of the Tower of Chains.

An answering volley rattled from the walls, peppered the Gurkish with flatbow bolts. Men dropped, others faltered and fell back, leaving a few bodies scattered across the cobbles. They scurried for cover in the buildings around the edge of the square, men darting through the shadows from house to house. A Union soldier jumped from the bridge and splashed along in the moat for a few strokes before disappearing. He did not resurface. Behind him a last handful of the stranded defenders were still crawling, desperately holding up their arms. The notion of the greater good was likely to be scant consolation for them as they choked their last breaths. Jezal squeezed his eyes shut and looked away.

‘There! To the east!’

Varuz and a few members of his staff had clustered around the far parapet, gazing out past the House of the Maker and towards the distant fields outside the city. Jezal strode over to them, shielded his eyes against the rising sun. Beyond the great wall of the Agriont, beyond the shining river and the wide curve of the city, he thought he caught some trace of movement. A wide crescent of movement, crawling slowly towards Adua.

One of the officers lowered an eye-glass. ‘Cavalry! Union Cavalry!’ ‘Are you sure?’

‘The Army!’

‘Late to the party,’ muttered Varuz, ‘but no less welcome for that.’

‘Hurrah for Marshal West!’

‘We are delivered!’

Jezal was in no mood to whoop for joy. Hope was a fine thing, of course, and had long been in short supply, but celebrations were decidedly premature. He crossed back to the other side of the tower and frowned down.

More Gurkish were surging into the square outside the citadel, and more still, and they were coming well prepared. They wheeled great sloping wooden screens forward, each one big enough for a score of men or more to hide behind. The foremost of them already bristled with flatbow bolts, but they continued to creep towards the bridge. Arrows flitted up and down. The wounded fell, did their best to crawl for the rear. One of the buildings at the side of the square had already caught fire, flames licking hungrily round the eaves of its roof.

‘The army!’ someone whooped from the opposite battlement. ‘Marshal West!’

‘Indeed.’ Marovia frowned down at the carnage below, the sounds of battle growing steadily more frantic. ‘Let us hope he has not come too late.’

The noise of fighting crept up through the cool air. Clashing and clicking, echoing calls. Logen glanced left and right at the men around him, jogging forward over the open fields, quick breath hissing, gear rattling, all blunt frowns and sharp weapons.

Hardly a heartening thing, to be part of all this again.

The sad fact was that Logen had felt more warmth and more trust with Ferro and Jezal, Bayaz and Quai than he did with his own kind now. They’d been a difficult set of bastards, each in their own way. It wasn’t that he’d really understood them, or even liked them much. But Logen had liked himself when he was with them. Out there in the deserted west of the World, he’d been a man you could rely on, like his father had been. A man with no bloody history breathing on his shoulder, no name blacker than hell, no need to watch his back every moment. A man with hopes for something better.

The thought of seeing those folk again, the chance at being that man again, put the spur to him, made Logen want to run at the grey wall of Adua all the faster. It seemed, in that moment anyway, as if he might be able to leave the Bloody-Nine outside it.

But the rest of the Northmen didn’t share his eagerness. It was closer to a stroll than a charge. They ambled up to a stand of trees, a couple of birds went flapping into the white sky, and they stopped altogether. No one said anything. One lad even sat down, with his back to a tree, and started supping water from a flask.

Logen stared at him. ‘By the dead, I don’t reckon I ever saw such a piss-weak charge as this. Did you leave your bones back in the North?’

There was a bit of mumbling, a few shifty looks. Red Hat glanced sideways, his tongue wedged into his bottom lip. ‘Maybe we did. Don’t get me wrong, chief, or your Royal Highness, or whatever it is now.’ He bowed his head to show he meant no disrespect by it. ‘I’ve fought before and hard enough, had my life balanced on a sword’s edge, and all o’ that. Just, well . . . why fight now, is what I’m saying. What we’re all thinking, I reckon. Ain’t none of our business, is it? Ain’t our fight, this.’

Dogman shook his head. ‘The Union are going to take us for a right crowd o’ cowards.’

‘Who cares what they think?’ someone said.

Red Hat stepped up close. ‘Look, chief, I don’t care much of a shit whether some fool I don’t know thinks I’m a coward. I’ve spilled enough blood for that. We all have.’

‘Huh,’ grunted Logen. ‘So your vote’s to stay here, then, is it?’

Red Hat shrugged. ‘Well, I guess—’ He squawked as Logen’s forehead crunched into his face, smashing his nose like a nut on an anvil. He dropped hard on his back in the mud, spluttering blood down his chin.

Logen turned round, and he let his face hang on one side, the way he used to. The Bloody-Nine's face – cold and dead, caring for nothing. It was easy to do it. Felt as natural on him as a favourite pair of boots. His hand found the cold grip of the Maker's sword, and all around him men eased back, shuffled away, muttered and whispered.

'Any other one o' you cunts want a vote?'

The lad dropped his flask in the grass and jumped up from where he'd been sitting. Logen gave a few of them his eye, one by one, whoever looked hardest, and one by one they looked at the ground, at the trees, at anything but him. Until he looked at Shivers. That long-haired bastard stared straight back at him. Logen narrowed his eyes. 'How about you?'

Shivers shook his head, hair swaying across his face. 'Oh no. Not now.'

'When you're ready, then. When any one o' you are ready. Until then, I'll have some work out o' you. Weapons,' he growled.

Swords and axes, spears and shields were all made ready quick-time. Men fussed about, finding their places, competing all of a sudden to be the first to charge. Red Hat was just getting up, wincing with one hand to his bloody face. Logen looked down at him. 'If you're feeling hard done by, think on this. In the old days you'd be trying to hold your guts in about now.'

'Aye,' he grunted, wiping his mouth. 'Right y'are.' Logen watched him walk off back to his boys, spitting blood. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's got a talent for turning a friend into an enemy.

'Did you have to?' asked the Dogman.

Logen shrugged. He hadn't wanted it, but he was leader now. Always a disaster, but there it was, and a man in charge can't have men putting questions. Just can't have it. They come with questions first, then they come with knives. 'Couldn't see another way. That's how it's always been, ain't it?'

'I was hoping times changed.'

'Times never change. You have to be realistic, Dogman.'

'Aye. Shame, though.'

A lot of things were a shame. Logen had given up trying to put them right a long time ago. He slid out the Maker's sword and held it up. 'Let's go, then! And this time like we care a shit!' He started off through the trees, hearing the rest of the lads following. Out into the open air, and the walls of Adua loomed up, a sheer grey cliff at the top of a grassy rise, studded with round towers. There were quite a number of corpses lying around. Enough to give even a battle-hardened Carl some cold feelings. Gurkish corpses mostly, from the colour of their skin, sprawled among all kinds of broken gear, squashed into muddy earth, trampled with hoof-prints.

'Steady!' shouted Logen as he jogged on through them. 'Steady!' He caught sight of something up ahead, a fence of sharpened stakes, the body of a horse hanging dead from one of them. Behind the stakes, men moved. Men with bows.

'Cover up!' A few arrows came zipping down. One thudded into Shivers' shield, a couple more into the ground round Logen's feet. A Carl not a stride from him got one in the chest and tumbled over.

Logen ran. The fence came wobbling towards him, a good bit slower than he'd have liked. Someone stood between two of the stakes, dark-faced, with a

shining breastplate, a red plume on his pointed helmet. He was shouting to a crowd of others gathered behind him, waving a curved sword. A Gurkish officer, maybe. As good a thing to charge at as any. Logen's boots squelched at the churned-up ground. A couple more arrows spun past him, hastily aimed. The officer's eyes went wide. He took a nervous step back, raised his sword.

Logen jerked to his left and the curved blade thudded into the turf at his feet. He growled as he swung the Maker's sword round and the heavy length of metal clanged deep into the officer's bright breastplate, left a great dent in it. He screeched, then tottered forwards, all doubled up and hardly able to gasp in a breath. His sword spun out of his hand and Logen hit him on the back of his head, crushed his helmet and sent him sprawling in the mud.

He looked to the others, but not one of them had moved. They were a tattered-looking set, like a dark-skinned version of the weakest kind of Thralls. Hardly the ruthless bastards he'd expected from the way that Ferro had always talked about the Gurkish. They huddled together, spears sticking out this way and that. A couple even had bows with arrows nocked, probably could have stuck him like a hedgehog, but they didn't. Still, charging right at them might well have been the very thing to wake them up. Logen had taken an arrow or two in his time and he didn't fancy another.

So instead of coming forward, he stood up tall, and he gave a roar. A fighting roar, like the one he'd given when he charged down the hill at Carleon, all those years ago, when he still had all his fingers and all his hopes intact. He felt the Dogman come up beside him, and lift his sword, and give a scream of his own. Then Shivers was up with them, bellowing like a bull and smashing the head of his axe against his shield. Then Red Hat, with his bloody face, and Grim, and all the rest, yelling their war cries.

They stood in a long line, shaking their weapons, beating them crashing together, roaring and screaming and whooping at the tops of their voices, making a sound as if hell itself had opened up and a crowd of devils was singing welcome. The brown men watched them, staring and trembling, their mouths and their eyes wide open. Logen didn't reckon they'd ever seen anything like this before.

One of them dropped his spear. Didn't mean to, maybe, just so struck with the noise and the sight of all these crazy hairy bastards his fingers came open. It fell anyway, whether he meant it or not, and that was it, they all started dropping their gear. Fast as they could, it clattered down in the grass. Seemed stupid to keep shouting, and the war cries died out, left the two groups of men staring at each other in silence across that stretch of mud, planted with bent stakes and twisted corpses.

'Strange kind o' battle, that,' muttered Shivers.

The Dogman leaned towards Logen. 'What do we do with 'em now we've got 'em?'

'We can't just sit hear minding 'em.'

'Uh,' said Grim.

Logen chewed at his lip, spun his sword round and round in his hand, trying to think of some clever way to come at this. He couldn't see one. 'Might as well just let 'em go.' He jerked his head away north. None of them moved, so he tried it again, and pointed with his sword. They cringed and muttered to

each other when he lifted it, one of them falling over in the mud. 'Just piss off that way,' he said, 'and we've got no argument. Just piss . . . off . . . that way!' He stabbed with the sword again.

One of them got the idea now, took a cautious step away from the group. When no one struck him dead, he started running. Soon enough the others followed him. Dogman watched the last of them shamble off. Then he shrugged his shoulders. 'Good luck to 'em, then, I guess.'

'Aye,' muttered Logen. 'Good luck.' Then, so quiet that no one could hear, 'Still alive, still alive, still alive . . .'

Glokta limped through the reeking gloom, down a fetid walkway half a stride across, his tongue squirming into his empty gums with the effort of staying upright, wincing all the way as the pain in his leg grew worse and worse, doing his best not to breathe through his nose. *I thought when I lay crippled in bed after I came back from Gurkhul I could sink no lower. When I presided over the brutality of a stinking prison in England I thought the same again. When I had a clerk slaughtered in an abattoir I imagined I had reached the bottom. How wrong I was.*

Cosca and his mercenaries formed a single file with Glokta in their midst, their cursing, grumbling, slapping footfalls echoing up and down the vaulted tunnel, the light from their swinging lamps casting swaying shadows over the glistening stone. Rotten black water dripped from above, trickled down the mossy walls, gurgled in slimy gutters, rushed and churned down the reeking channel beside him. Ardee shuffled along behind with his instruments clasped under one arm. She had abandoned any attempt to hold up the hem of her dress and the fabric was well stained with black slurry. She looked up at him, damp hair hanging across her face, and made a weak effort at a smile. 'You certainly do take a girl to the very best places.'

'Oh, indeed. My knack for finding romantic settings no doubt explains my continuing popularity with the fairer sex.' Glokta winced at a painful twinge. 'Despite being a crippled monstrosity. Which way are we heading, now?'

Longfoot hobbled along in front, tethered by a rope to one of the mercenaries. 'North! Due north, give or take. We are just beside the Middleway.'

'Huh.' *Above us, not ten strides distant, are some of the most fashionable addresses in the city. The shimmering palaces and a river of shit, so much closer together than most would ever like to believe. Everything beautiful has a dark side, and some of us must dwell there, so that others can laugh in the light.* His snort of laughter turned to a squeak of panic as his toeless foot slid on the sticky walkway. He flailed at the wall with his free hand, fumbled his cane and it clattered to the slimy stones. Ardee caught his elbow before he fell and pulled him upright. He could not stop a girlish whimper of pain hissing out from the gaps in his teeth.

'You're really not enjoying yourself, are you?'

'I've had better days.' He smacked the back of his head against the stone as Ardee leaned down to retrieve his cane. 'To be betrayed by both,' he found

himself muttering. 'That hurts. Even me. One I expected. One I could have taken. But both? Why?'

'Because you're a ruthless, plotting, bitter, twisted, self-pitying villain?' Glokta stared at her, and she shrugged. 'You asked.' They set off once again through the nauseating darkness.

'The question was meant to be rhetorical.'

'Rhetoric? In a sewer?'

'Wait up, there!' Cosca held up his hand and the grumbling procession shuffled to a halt again. A sound filtered down from above, softly at first, then louder – the rhythmic boom of tramping feet, seeming to come, disconcertingly, from everywhere at once. Cosca pressed himself to the sticky wall, stripes of daylight falling across his face from a grate above, the long feather on his cap drooping with slime. Voices settled through the murk. Kantic voices. Cosca grinned, and jabbed one finger up towards the roof. 'Our old friends the Gurmish. Those bastards don't give up, eh?'

'They've moved quickly,' grunted Glokta as he tried to catch his breath.

'No one much fighting in the streets any more, I imagine. All pulled back to the Agriont, or surrendered.'

Surrendering to the Gurmish. Glokta winced as he stretched out his leg. Rarely a good idea, and not one a man would ever consider twice. 'We must hurry, then. Move along there, Brother Longfoot!'

The Navigator hobbled on. 'Not much further, now! I have not led you wrong, oh no, not I! That would not have been my way. We are close now, to the moat, very close. If there is a way inside the walls, I will find it, on that you may depend. I will have you inside the walls in a—'

'Shut your mouth and get on with it,' growled Glokta.

One of the workmen shook the last of the wood shavings from his barrel, another raked the heap of pale powder smooth, and they were done. The whole Square of Marshals, from the towering white walls of the Halls Martial on Ferro's right to the gilded gates of the Lords' Round on her left, was entirely covered in sawdust. It was as if snow had come suddenly, only here, and left a thin blanket across the smooth flags. Across the dark stone, and across the bright metal.

'Good.' Bayaz nodded with rare satisfaction. 'Very good!'

'Is that all, my Lord?' called their foreman from the midst of their cringing group.

'Unless any of you wish to stay, and witness the destruction of the indestructible Hundred Words?'

The foreman squinted sideways at one of his fellows with some confusion. 'No. No, I think we'll just . . . you know . . .' He and the rest of the workmen began to back off, taking their empty barrels with them. Soon they were away between the white palaces. Ferro and Bayaz were left alone in all that flat expanse of dust.

Just the two of them, and the Maker's box, and the thing that it contained.

'So. The trap is set. We need merely wait for our quarry.' Bayaz tried his

knowing grin, but Ferro was not fooled. She saw his gnarled hands fussing with each other, the muscles clenching and unclenching on the side of his bald head. He was not sure if his plans would work. However wise he was, however subtle, however cunning, he could not be sure. The thing in the box, the cold and heavy thing that Ferro longed to touch, was an unknown. The only precedent for its use was far away, in the empty wastes of the Old Empire. The vast ruin of blighted Aulcus.

Ferro frowned, and loosened her sword in its scabbard.

‘If they come, that will not save you.’

‘You can never have too many knives,’ she growled back. ‘How do you know they will even come this way?’

‘What else can they do? They must come to wherever I am. That is their purpose.’ Bayaz pulled in a ragged breath through his nose, and blew it out. ‘And I am here.’

Sacrifices

Dogman squeezed through the gate along with a rush of others, some Northmen and an awful lot of Union boys, all pouring into the city after that excuse for a battle outside. There were a few folk scattered on the walls over the archway, cheering and whooping like they were at a wedding. A fat man in a leather apron was standing on the other side of the tunnel, clapping folk on the back as they came past. 'Thank you, friend! Thank you!' He shoved something into Dogman's hand, grinning like a madman all the way. A loaf of bread.

'Bread.' Dogman sniffed at it, but it smelled alright. 'What the hell's all that about?' The man had a whole heap of loaves on a cart. He was handing them out to any soldier that came past, Union or Northman. 'Who's he, anyway?'

Grim shrugged. 'A baker?'

There weren't much time to think on it. They were all getting shoved together into a big space full of men pushing, and grumbling, and making mess. All kind of soldiers and some old men and women round the edge, starting to get tired of cheering. A well-clipped lad in a black uniform was standing on top of a cart in the midst of this madness and screeching like a lost goat.

'Eighth regiment, towards the Four Corners! Ninth towards the Agriont! If you're with the tenth you came through the wrong damn gate!'

'Thought we were to the docks, Major!'

'Poulder's division are dealing with the docks! We're for the north part of the city! Eighth regiment towards the Four Corners!'

'I'm with the Fourth!'

'Fourth? Where's your horse?'

'Dead!'

'What about us?' roared Logen. 'Northmen!'

The lad stared at them, wide-eyed, then he threw up his hands. 'Just get in there! If you see any Gurkish, kill them!' He turned back towards the gate, jerking his thumb over his shoulder into the city. 'Ninth regiment towards the Agriont!'

Logen scowled. 'We'll get no sense here.' He pointed down a wide street, full of walking soldiers. Some great tall tower poked up above the buildings. Huge thing, must've been built on a hill. 'We get split up, we'll just aim at that.' He struck off down that street and Dogman came after, Grim behind with Shivers and his boys, Red Hat and his crew further back. Wasn't long before the crowds thinned out and they were marching down empty streets, quiet except for some birds calling, happy as ever, not caring a thing for there having been a battle just now, and caring even less that there was another one coming.

Dogman wasn't giving it a lot of thought either, for all he had his bow loose in one hand. He was too busy staring at the houses down either side of the

road. Houses the like of which he'd never seen in his life. Made of little square, red stones, and black wood filled in with white render. Each one of 'em was big enough for a chieftain to be happy with, most with glass windows in as well.

'Bloody palaces, eh?'

Logen snorted. 'You think this is something? You should see this Agriont we're aiming at. The buildings they got there. You never dreamed o' the like. Carleon's a pigsty beside this place.'

Dogman had always found Carleon a good bit too built-up. This was downright ridiculous. He dropped back a way, found he was walking next to Shivers. He lore the loaf and held one half out.

'Thanks.' Shivers took a bite out of the end, then another. 'Not bad.'

'Ain't nothing quite like it, is there? That taste o' new bread? Tastes like . . . peace, I guess.'

'If you say so.' They chewed together for a while, saying nothing.

Dogman looked sideways. 'I think you need to put this feud o' yours behind you.'

'What feud's that?'

'How many you got? The one with our new king up there. Ninefingers. '

'Can't say I haven't tried.' Shivers frowned up the road at Logen's back. 'But whenever I turn around, there it is beside me.'

'Shivers, you're a good man. I like you. We all do. You got bones, lad, and brains too, and men'll follow you. You could go a long way if you don't get yourself killed, and there's the problem. I don't want to see you start up something you can't put a good end to.'

'You needn't worry then. Anything I start I'll make sure I finish.'

Dogman shook his head. 'No, no, that ain't my point, lad, not at all. Maybe you come out on top, maybe you don't. My point is neither one's a victory. Blood makes blood, and nothing else. My point is it ain't too late for you. It ain't too late for you to be better'n that.'

Shivers frowned at him. Then he tossed the heel of bread away, turned his big shoulder and headed off without another word. Dogman sighed. Some things can't be put right just with talk. Some things can't be put right at all.

They came out from the maze of buildings and onto a river. It must've been as wide as the Whiteflow, only the banks on each side were made of stone. The biggest bridge the Dogman had ever seen spanned it, railings made of curly iron, wide enough to drive two carts across side by side. Another wall stood at the far end, even bigger than the one they came through first. Dogman took a few gawping steps forward, and he looked up and down the gleaming water, and he saw that there were more bridges. A lot more, and some even bigger, standing out from a great forest of walls, and towers, and soaring high buildings.

A lot of the others were staring too, eyes wide open like they'd stepped out onto the moon. Even Grim had a twist to his face that might've been surprise.

'Bloody hell,' said Shivers. 'You ever see the like o' this?'

Dogman's neck was aching from staring round at it all. 'They've got so much here. Why do they even want bloody England? Place is a shit-hole.'

Logen shrugged. 'Couldn't say. Some men always want more, I guess.'

‘Some men always want more, eh, Brother Longfoot?’ Glokta gave a disapproving shake of his head. ‘I spared your other foot. I spared your life. Now you want freedom, too?’

‘Superior,’ he wheedled. ‘If I may, you did undertake to release me . . . I have upheld my side of the bargain. That door should open onto a square not far from the House of Questions—’

‘We shall see.’

One last splintering blow of the axe and the door shuddered back on its rusty hinges, daylight spilling into the narrow cellar. The mercenary with the tattooed neck stood aside and Glokta limped up and peered out. *Ah, fresh air. A gift we so often take for granted.* A short set of steps led up to a cobbled yard, hemmed in by the grubby backs of grey buildings. Glokta knew it. *Just round the corner from the House of Questions, as promised.*

‘Superior?’ murmured Longfoot.

Glokta curled his lip. *But where’s the harm? The chances are none of us will live out the day in any case, and dead men can afford to be merciful. The only kind of men that can, in fact.* ‘Very well. Let him go.’ The one-eyed mercenary slid out a long knife and sawed through the rope round Longfoot’s wrists. ‘It would be best if I didn’t ever see you again.’

The Navigator had the ghost of a grin on his face. ‘Don’t worry, Superior. I was only this moment thinking the very same thing.’ He hobbled back the way they had come, down the dank stairway towards the sewers, rounded a corner and was gone.

‘Tell me you brought the things,’ said Glokta.

‘I’m untrustworthy, Superior. Not incompetent.’ Cosca flicked a hand at the mercenaries. ‘Time, my friends. Let’s black up.’

As a unit they pulled out black masks and buckled them on, pulled off their ragged coats, their torn clothes. Every man wore clean black underneath, from head to toe, with weapons carefully stowed. In a few moments a crowd of criminal villains was transformed into a well-ordered unit of Practicals of his Majesty’s Inquisition. *Not that there’s too much of a leap from one to the other.*

Cosca himself whisked his coat off, pulled it quickly inside out and dragged it back on. The lining was black as night. ‘Always wise to wear a choice of colours,’ he explained. ‘In case one should be called upon to change sides in a pinch.’ *The very definition of a turncoat.* He took off his hat, flicked at the filthy feather. ‘Can I keep it?’

‘No.’

‘You’re a hard man, Superior.’ He grinned as he tossed the cap away into the shadows. ‘And I love you for it.’ He pulled his own mask on, then frowned at Ardee, standing, confused and exhausted in a corner of the store-room. ‘What about her?’

‘Her? A prisoner, Practical Cosca! A spy in league with the Gurkish. His Eminence expressed his desire to question her personally.’ Ardee blinked at him. ‘It’s easy. Just look scared.’

She swallowed. ‘That shouldn’t be a problem.’

Wandering through the House of Questions with the aim of arresting the Arch Lector? I should say not. Gloкта snapped his fingers. 'We need to move.'

'We need to move,' said West. 'Have we cleared the docks? Where the hell is Poulder?'

'Nobody seems to know, sir.' Brint tried to push his horse further, but they were squashed in by a grumbling throng. Spears waved, their points flailing dangerously close. Soldiers cursed. Sergeants bellowed. Officers clucked like frustrated chickens. It was hard to imagine more difficult terrain than the narrow streets behind the docks through which to manoeuvre an army of thousands. To make matters worse there was now an ominous flow of wounded, limping or being carried, in the opposite direction.

'Make some room for the Lord Marshall!' roared Pike. 'The Lord Marshall!' He lifted his sword as though he was more than willing to lay about him with the flat, and men rapidly cleared out of the way, a valley forming through the rattling spears. A rider came clattering up out of their midst. Jalenhorm, a bloody cut across his forehead.

'Are you alright?'

The big man grinned. 'It's nothing, sir. Caught my head on a damn timber.'

'Progress?'

'We're forcing them back towards the western side of the city. Kroy's cavalry made it to the Four Corners, as far as I can tell, but the Gurkish still have the Agriont well surrounded, and now they're regrouping, counterattacking from the west. A lot of Kroy's foot are still all caught up in the streets on the other side of the river. If we don't get reinforcement there soon—'

'I need to speak to General Poulder,' snapped West. 'Where the hell is bloody Poulder? Brint?'

'Sir?'

'Take a couple of these fellows and bring Poulder here, right away!' He stabbed at the air with a finger. 'In person!'

'Yes, sir!' Brint did his best to turn his horse around.

'What about at sea? Is Reutzer up?'

'As far as I'm aware he's engaged the Gurkish fleet, but I've no idea how . . .'

The smell of rotting salt and burning wood intensified as they emerged from the buildings and onto the harbour. 'Bloody hell.'

West could only agree.

The graceful curve of Adua's docks had been transformed into a crescent of carnage. Near to them the quay was blackened, wasted, scattered with broken gear and broken bodies. Further off, crowds of men were struggling in ill-formed groups, polearms sticking up in all directions like hedgehog's spines, the air heavy with their noise. Union battle-flags and Gurkish standards flailed like scarecrows in the breeze. The epic conflict covered almost the entire long sweep of the shoreline. Several warehouses were in flames, sending up a shimmering heat-haze, lending a ghostly air to the hundreds of men locked in battle beyond them. Long smears of choking smoke, black, grey, white, rolled

from the burning buildings and out into the bay. There, in the churning harbour, a host of ships was engaged in their own desperate struggle.

Vessels ploughed this way and that under full sail, turning, tacking, jockeying for position, flinging glittering spray high into the air. Catapults hurled flaming missiles, archers on the decks loosed flaming volleys, sailors crawled high in the cobwebs of rigging. Other ships were locked together in ungainly pairs by rope and grapple, like fighting dogs snapping at one another, glinting sunlight showing men in savage mêlée on their decks. Stricken vessels limped vainly, torn sailcloth hanging, slashed rigging dangling. Several were burning, sending up brown columns of smoke, turning the low sun into an ugly smudge. Wreckage floated everywhere on the frothing water – barrels, boxes, shivered timbers and dead sailors.

West knew the familiar shapes of the Union ships, yellow suns stitched into their sails, he could guess which were the Gurmish vessels. But there were others there too – long, lean, black-hulled predators, each one of their white sails marked with a black cross. One in particular towered far over every other vessel in the harbour, and was even now being secured at one of the few wharves still intact.

‘Nothing good ever comes from Talins,’ muttered Pike.

‘What the hell are Styrian ships doing here?’

The ex-convict pointed to one in the very act of ramming a Gurmish ship in the side. ‘Fighting the Gurmish, by the look of it.’

‘Sir,’ somebody asked. ‘What shall we do?’

The eternal question. West opened his mouth, but nothing came out. How could one man hope to exert any measure of control over the colossal chaos spread out before him? He remembered Varuz, in the desert, striding around with his huge staff crowding after him. He remembered Burr, thumping at his maps and wagging his thick finger. The greatest responsibility of a commander was not to command, but to look like he knew how to. He swung his sore leg over the saddle bow and slid down to the sticky cobbles.

‘We will set up our headquarters here, for the time being. Major Jalenhorn?’

‘Sir?’

‘Find General Kroy and tell him to keep pressing north and west, towards the Agriont.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Somebody get some men together and start clearing this rubbish from the docks. We need to get our people through quicker.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And somebody find me General Poulder, damn it! Each man has to do his part!’

‘What’s this now?’ grunted Pike.

A strange procession was sweeping down the blasted quay towards them, almost dreamily out of place amongst the wreckage. A dozen watchful guards in black armour flanked a single man. He had black hair streaked with grey, sported a pointed beard, immaculately trimmed. He wore black boots, a fluted breastplate of black steel, a cloak of black velvet flowing majestically from one shoulder. He was dressed, in fact, like the world’s richest undertaker, but

walked with the kind of steely self-importance reserved for the highest royalty. He plotted a direct course towards West, looking neither left nor right, the dumbfounded guards and staff forced effortlessly aside by his air of command like iron filings parted by magnetic repulsion.

He held out his black-gauntleted hand. 'I am Grand Duke Orso, of Talins.'

The idea, perhaps, was that West should kneel and kiss it. Instead he seized it with his own and gave it a firm shake. 'Your Excellency, an honour.' He had no idea if that was even the proper form of address. He had scarcely been expecting to encounter one of the most powerful men in the world in the midst of a bloody battle on the docks of Adua. 'I am Lord Marshal West, commander of his Majesty's Army. Not to appear ungrateful, but you are far from home—'

'My daughter is your Queen. On her behalf, the people of Talins are prepared to make any sacrifice. As soon as I heard of the . . .' He arched one black eyebrow at the burning harbour. 'Troubles, here, I prepared an expedition. The ships of my fleet, as well as ten thousand of my best troops, stand at your disposal.'

West hardly knew how to respond. 'They do?'

'I have taken the liberty of disembarking them. They are engaged in clearing the Gurmish from the south-western quarter of the city. The Three Farms, is it called?'

'Er . . . yes.'

Duke Orso gave the thinnest of smiles. 'A picturesque name for an urban area. You need no longer trouble yourself with your western flank. I wish you the best of luck with your endeavours, Lord Marshal. If fate is willing, we will meet each other afterward. Victorious.' He bowed his magnificent head and swept away.

West stared after him. He knew that he really should have been grateful for the sudden appearance of ten thousand helpful Styrian troops, but he could not escape the nagging feeling that he would have been happier if Grand Duke Orso had never arrived. For the time being, however, he had more pressing worries.

'Lord Marshal!' It was Brint, hurrying down the quay at the front of a group of officers. One side of his face was covered in a long smear of ash. 'Lord Marshal, General Poulder—'

'At long bloody last!' snapped West. 'Now perhaps we'll have some answers. Where the hell is that bastard?' He shouldered Brint aside, and froze. Poulder lay on a stretcher held by four muddy and miserable-looking members of his staff. He had the expression of a man in peaceful sleep, to the degree that West kept expecting to hear him snore. A huge, ragged wound in his chest rather spoiled the effect, however.

'General Poulder led the charge from the front,' said one of the officers, swallowing his tears. 'A noble sacrifice . . .'

West stared down. How often had he wished that man dead? He jerked one hand over his face at a sudden wave of nausea. 'Damn it,' he whispered.

'Damn it!' hissed Glokta as he twisted his trembling ankle on the topmost step and nearly pitched onto his face. A bony Inquisitor coming the other way gave him a long look. 'Is there a problem?' he snarled back. The man lowered his head and hurried past without speaking.

Click, tap, pain. The dim hallway slid by with agonising slowness. Every step was an ordeal, now, but he forced himself on, legs burning, foot throbbing, neck aching, sweat running down his twisted back under his clothes, a rictus of toothless nonchalance clamped onto his face. At every gasp and grunt through the building he had expected a challenge. With each twinge and spasm he had been waiting for the Practicals to flood from the doorways and butcher him and his thinly disguised hirelings like hogs.

But those few nervous people they had passed had scarcely looked up. *Fear has made them sloppy. The world teeters at a precipice. All scared to take a step in case they put a foot into empty air. The instinct of self-preservation. It can destroy a man's efficiency.*

He lurched through the open doors and into the ante-room outside the Arch Lector's office. The secretary's head jerked angrily up. 'Superior Glokta! You cannot simply . . .' He stumbled on the words as the mercenaries began to tramp into the narrow room behind him. 'I mean to say . . . you cannot . . .'

'Silence! I am acting on the express orders of the king himself.' *Well, everyone lies. The difference between a hero and a villain is whether anyone believes him.* 'Step aside!' he hissed at the two Practicals flanking the door, 'or be prepared to answer for it.' They glanced at each other, then, as more of Cosca's men appeared, raised their hands together and allowed themselves to be disarmed. *The instinct of self-preservation. A decided disadvantage.*

Glokta paused before the doorway. *Where I have cringed so often at the pleasure of his Eminence.* His fingers tingled against the wood. *Can it possibly be this easy? To simply walk up in broad daylight and arrest the most powerful man in the Union?* He had to suppress a smirk. *If only I had thought of it sooner.* He wrenched the doorknob round and lurched over the threshold.

Sult's office was much as it had always been. The great windows, with their view of the University, the huge round table with its jewelled map of the Union, the ornate chairs and the brooding portraits. It was not Sult sitting in the tall chair, however. It was none other than his favourite lapdog, Superior Goyle. *Trying the big seat out for size, are we? Far too big for you, I'm afraid.*

Goyle's first reaction was outrage. *How dare anyone barge in here like this?* His second was confusion. *Who would dare to barge in here like this?* His third was shock. *The cripple? But how?* His fourth, as he saw Cosca and four of his men follow Glokta through the door, was horror. *Now we're getting somewhere.*

'You!' he hissed. 'But you're—'

'Slaughtered? Change of plans, I'm afraid. Where's Sult?'

Goyle's eyes flickered around the room, over the dwarfish mercenary, the one with a hook for a hand, the one with the hideous boils, and came to rest on Cosca, swaggering round the edge of the chamber with one fist on his sword-hilt.

'I'll pay you! Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it!'

Cosca held out his open palm. 'I prefer cash in hand.'

'Now? I don't have . . . I don't have it with me!'

‘A shame, but I work on the same principle as a whore. You’ll buy no fun with promises, my friend. No fun at all.’

‘Wait!’ Goyle stumbled up and took a step back, his trembling hands held up in front of him. *But there’s nowhere to go but out the window. That’s the trouble with ambition. It’s easy to forget, when you’re always looking upwards, that the only way down from the dizzy heights is a long drop.*

‘Sit down, Goyle,’ growled Glokta.

Cosca grabbed his wrist, twisted his right arm savagely behind him and made him squeal, forced him back into the chair, clamped one hand round the back of his head and smashed his face into the beautiful map of the Union. There was a sharp crunch as his nose broke, spattering blood across the western part of Middelrand.

Hardly subtle, but then the time for subtlety is behind us. The Arch Lector’s confession, or someone close to him . . . Sult would have been better, but if we cannot have the brains, I suppose we must make do with the arsehole. ‘Where is that girl with my instruments?’ Ardee crept cautiously into the room, came slowly across to the table and put the case down.

Glokta snapped his fingers, pointed. The fat mercenary ambled up and took a firm grip on Goyle’s free arm, dragged it sharply out across the table. ‘I expect you think you know an awful lot about torture, eh, Goyle? Believe me, though, you don’t really understand a thing until you’ve spent some time on both sides of the table.’

‘You mad bastard!’ The Superior squirmed, smearing blood across the Union with his face. ‘You’ve crossed the line!’

‘Line?’ Glokta spluttered with laughter. ‘I spent the night cutting the fingers from one of my friends and killing another, and you dare to talk to me about *lines*?’ He pushed open the lid of the case and his instruments offered themselves up. ‘The only line that matters is the one that separates the strong from the weak. The man who asks the questions from the man who answers them. There are no other lines.’ He leaned forward and ground the tip of his finger into the side of Goyle’s skull. ‘That’s all in your head! The manacles, if you please.’

‘Eh?’ Cosca looked to the fat mercenary, and the man shrugged, the blurred tattoos on his thick neck squirming.

‘Pffft,’ said the dwarf. Boil-face was silent. The one-handed mercenary had pulled down his mask and was busy picking his nose with his hook.

Glokta arched his back and gave a heavy sigh. *There really is no replacement for experienced help.* ‘Then I suppose we must improvise.’ He scooped up a dozen long nails and scattered them jingling across the table-top. He slid out the hammer, its polished head shining. ‘I think you can see where we’re going with this.’

‘No. No! We can work something out, we can—’ Glokta pressed the point of one nail into Goyle’s wrist. ‘Ah! Wait! Wait—’

‘Would you be good enough to hold this? I have only one hand to spare.’

Cosca took the nail gingerly between finger and thumb. ‘Mind where you aim with the hammer, though, eh?’

‘Don’t worry. I am quite precise.’ *An awful lot of practice.*

‘Wait!’ screeched Goyle.

The hammer made three metallic clicks, almost disappointingly quiet, as it drove the nail cleanly between the bones of Goyle's forearm and into the table beneath. He roared with pain, spraying bloody spit over the table.

'Oh, come now, Superior, compared to what you did to your prisoners in Angland this is really quite infantile. Try to pace yourself. If you scream like that now, you'll have nowhere to go later.' The fat mercenary seized Goyle's other wrist in his pudgy hands and dragged it out across the map of the Union.

'Nail?' asked Cosca, raising an eyebrow.

'You're getting the hang of it.'

'Wait! Ah! Wait!'

'Why? This is the closest I've come to enjoying myself in six years. Don't begrudge me my little moment. I get so very few of them.' Glokta raised the hammer.

'Wait!'

Click. Goyle roared with pain again. Click. And again. Click. The nail was through, and the one-time scourge of Angland's penal colonies was pinned flat by both arms. *I suppose that's where ambition gets you without the talent. Humility is easier to teach than one would think. All it takes to puncture our arrogance is a nail or two in the right place.* Goyle's breath hissed through his bloody teeth, pinioned fingers clawing at the wood. Glokta disapprovingly shook his head. 'I would stop struggling if I was you. You'll only tear the flesh.'

'You'll pay for this, you crippled bastard! Don't think you won't!'

'Oh, I've paid already.' Glokta turned his neck around in a slow circle, trying to make the grumbling muscles in his shoulders unclench just a fraction. 'I was kept, I am not sure for how long, but I would guess at several months, in a cell no bigger than a chest of drawers. Far too small to stand, or even to sit up straight in. Every possible position twisted, bent, agonising. Hundreds of interminable hours in the pitch darkness, the stifling heat. Kneeling in a stinking slurry of my own shit, wriggling, and squirming, and gasping for air. Begging for water which my jailers let drip down through a grate above. Sometimes they would piss through it, and I would be grateful. I have never stood up straight since. I really have no idea how I remained sane.' Glokta thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. 'Perhaps I didn't. In any case, these are the kind of sacrifices I have made. What sacrifices will you make, just to keep Sult's secrets?'

No answer but the blood running out from under Goyle's forearms, pooling around the glittering stone that marked the House of Questions in the city of Keln.

'Huh.' Glokta gripped his cane hard and leaned down to whisper in Goyle's ear. 'There's a little bit of flesh, between your fruits and your arsehole. You never really see it, unless you're a contortionist, or unnaturally fond of mirrors. You know the one I'm talking about. Men spend hours thinking about the area in front of it, and almost as long on the area behind, but that little patch of flesh? Unfairly ignored.' He scooped up a few nails and jingled them gently in Goyle's face. 'I mean to set that right, today. I'm going to start there, and work outwards, and believe me, once I'm done, you'll be thinking about that patch of flesh for the rest of your life. Or you'll be thinking about where it used to be, at least. Practical Cosca, would you be kind enough to help the

Superior out of his trousers?’

‘The University!’ bellowed Goyle. He had a sheen of sweat all over his balding head. ‘Sult! He’s in the University!’

So soon? Almost disappointing. But then few bullies take a beating well. ‘What’s he doing there, at a time like this?’

‘I . . . I don’t—’

‘Not good enough. Trousers, please.’

‘Silber! He’s with Silber!’

Glokta frowned. ‘The University Administrator?’

Goyle’s eyes darted from Glokta, to Cosca, and back again. He squeezed them shut. ‘The Adeptus Demonic!’

There was a long pause. ‘The what?’

‘Silber, he doesn’t just run the University! He conducts . . . experiments.’

‘Experiments of what nature?’ Glokta jabbed sharply at Goyle’s bloody face with the head of the hammer. ‘Before I nail your tongue to the table.’

‘Occult experiments! Sult has been giving him money, for a long time! Since the First of the Magi came calling! Before, maybe!’

Occult experiments? Funding from the Arch Lector? It hardly seems Sult’s style, but it explains why those damn Adepts were expecting money from me when I first visited the place. And why Vitari and her circus have set up shop there now. ‘What experiments?’

‘Silber . . . he can make contact . . . with the Other Side!’

‘What?’

‘It’s true! I have seen it! He can learn things, secrets, there is no other way of knowing, and now . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘He says he has found a way to bring them through!’

‘Them?’

‘The Tellers of Secrets, he calls them!’

Glokta licked at his dry lips. ‘Demons?’ *I thought his Eminence had no patience with superstition, when all this time . . . The nerve of the man!*

‘He can send them against his enemies, he says. Against the Arch Lector’s enemies! They are ready to do it!’

Glokta felt his left eye twitching, and he pressed the back of his hand against it. *A year ago I would have laughed to my boots and nailed him to the ceiling. But things are different, now. We passed inside the House of the Maker. We saw Shickel smile as she burned. If there are Eaters? If there are Magi? Why should there not be demons? How could there not be?* ‘What enemies?’

‘The High Justice! The First of the Magi!’ Goyle squeezed his eyes shut again. ‘The king,’ he whimpered.

Ahhhh. The King. Those two little words are my kind of magic. Glokta turned to Ardee, and showed her the yawning gap in his front teeth. ‘Would you be so kind as to prepare a Paper of Confession?’

‘Would I . . .’ She stared at him for a moment, eyes wide in her pale face, then hurried to the Arch Lector’s desk, snatched up a sheet of paper and a pen, dipped it rattling in a bottle of ink. She paused, her hand trembling. ‘What should I write?’

‘Oh, something like, “I, Superior Goyle, confess to being an accomplice in a

treasonous plot of his Eminence Arch Lector Sult, to . . . ' *How to phrase it? He raised his brows. How else but call it what it is?* ' "To use diabolical arts against his Majesty the king and members of his Closed Council."

The nib scratched clumsily over the paper, scattering specks of ink. Ardee held it crackling out to him. 'Good enough?'

He remembered the beautiful documents that Practical Frost used to prepare. The elegant, flowing script, the immaculate wording. *Each Paper of Confession, a work of art.* Glokta stared sadly down at the ink-spotted daub in his hand.

'But a brief step from unreadable, but it will serve.' He slid the paper under Goyle's trembling hand, then took the pen from Ardee and wedged it between his fingers. 'Sign.'

Goyle sobbed, sniffed, scrawled his name at the bottom of the page as best he could with his arm nailed down. *I win, and for once the taste is almost sweet.*

'Excellent,' said Glokta. 'Pull those nails, and find some sort of bandage. It would be a shame if he bled to death before he had the chance to testify. Gag him, though, I've heard enough for now. We'll take him with us to the High Justice.'

'Wait! Wait! Wurghh—!' Goyle's cries were sharply cut off as the mercenary with the boils wedged a wad of dirty cloth in his mouth. The dwarf slid the pliers from the case. *So far, and we are still alive. What ever are the odds of that?* Glokta limped to the window and stood, stretching his aching legs. There was a muffled shriek as the first nail was ripped from Goyle's arm, but Glokta's thoughts were elsewhere. He stared out towards the University, its spires looming up through the smoky murk like clawing fingers. *Occult experiments? Summonings and sendings?* He licked sourly at his empty gums. *What is going on in there?*

'What is going on out there?' Jezal strode up and down the roof of the Tower of Chains in a manner which he hoped was reminiscent of a caged tiger, but probably was closer to a criminal on the morning of his own hanging.

Smoke had drawn a sooty veil across the city and made it impossible to tell what was happening any further than a half mile distant. Members of Varuz' staff, scattered around the parapets, would occasionally call out useless and wildly contradictory news. There was fighting in the Four Corners, up the Middleway, throughout the central part of the city. There was fighting on land and on sea. By turns all hope was lost and they were on the verge of deliverance. But one thing was in no doubt. Below, beyond the moat of the Agriont, the Gurkish efforts continued ominously unabated.

A rain of flatbow bolts continued to pepper the square outside the gates, but for every corpse the Gurkish left, for every wounded man dragged away, five more would vomit out from the burning buildings like bees from a broken hive. Soldiers swarmed down there in teeming hundreds, enclosing the whole circuit of the Agriont in an ever-strengthening ring of men and steel. They squatted behind their wooden screens, they shot arrows up towards the battlements. The pounding of drums had drawn steadily closer and now

echoed out around the city. Peering through his eye-glass, with every muscle tensed to try and hold it steady, Jezal had begun to notice strange figures scattered below.

Tall and graceful figures, conspicuous in pearly white armour edged with glinting gold, they moved among the Gurmish soldiers, pointing, ordering, directing. Often, now, they were pointing towards the bridge that led to the west gate of the Agriant. Dark thoughts niggled at the back of Jezal's mind. Khalul's Hundred Words? Risen up from the shadowy corners of history to bring the First of the Magi to justice?

'If I didn't know better, I would have said that they were preparing for an assault.'

'There is no cause for alarm,' croaked Varuz, 'our defences are impregnable.' His voice quavered, then cracked entirely at the final word, doing little to give anyone the slightest reassurance. Only a few short weeks ago, nobody would have dared to suggest that the Agriant could ever fall. But nobody would ever have dreamed that it would be surrounded by legions of Gurmish soldiers, either. Very plainly, the rules had changed. A deep blast of horns rang out.

'Down there,' muttered one of his staff.

Jezal peered through his borrowed eye-glass. Some form of great cart had been drawn up through the streets, like a wooden house on wheels, covered by plates of beaten metal. Even now, Gurmish soldiers were loading barrels into it under the direction of two men in white armour.

'Explosive powder,' someone said, unhelpfully.

Jezal felt Marovia's hand on his arm. 'Your Majesty, it might be best if you were to retire.'

'And if I am not safe here? Where, precisely, will I be out of danger, do you suppose?'

'Marshal West will soon deliver us, I am sure. But in the meantime the palace is much the safest place. I will accompany you.' He gave an apologetic smile. 'At my age, I fear I will be little use on the walls.'

Gorst held out one gauntleted hand towards the stairs. 'This way.'

'This way,' growled Glokta, limping up the hall as swiftly as his ruined feet would carry him, Cosca ambling after. Click, tap, pain.

Only one secretary remained outside the office of the High Justice, peering disapprovingly over his twinkling eye-glasses. *No doubt the rest have donned ill-fitting armour and are manning the walls. Or, more likely, have locked themselves in cellars. If only I were with them.*

'I am afraid his Worship is busy.'

'Oh, he will see me, don't worry about that.' Glokta hobbled past without stopping, placed his hand on the brass doorknob of Marovia's office, and almost jerked it back in surprise. The metal was icy cold. Cold as hell. He turned it with his fingertips and opened the door a crack. A breath of white vapour curled out into the hall, like the freezing mist that would hang over the snowy valleys in Angland in the midst of winter.

It was deathly cold in the room beyond. The heavy wooden furniture, the

old oak panelling, the grubby window panes, all glittered with white hoarfrost. The heaps of legal papers were furry with it. A bottle of wine on a table by the door had shattered, leaving behind a bottle-shaped block of pink ice and a scattering of sparkling splinters.

'What in hell . . .' Glokta's breath smoked before his smarting lips. Mysterious articles were scattered widely about the wintry room. A long, snaking length of black tubing was frozen to the panelling, like a string of sausages left in the snow. There were patches of black ice on the books, on the desk, on the crunching carpet. There were pink fragments frozen to the ceiling, long white splinters frozen to the floor . . .

Human remains?

A large chunk of icy flesh, partly coated in rime, lay in the middle of the desk. Glokta turned his head sideways to better take it in. There was a mouth, still with some teeth attached, an ear, an eye. Some strands of a long beard. Enough, in the end, for Glokta to recognise whose parts were scattered so widely around the freezing room. *Who else but my last hope, my third suitor, High Justice Marovia?*

Cosca cleared his throat. 'It seems there is something to your friend Silber's claims after all.'

An understatement of devilish proportions. Glokta felt the muscles round his left eye twitching with a painful intensity. The secretary fussed up to the door behind them, peered through, gasped, and reeled away. Glokta heard him being noisily sick outside. 'I doubt the High Justice will be lending us much assistance.'

'True. But isn't it getting a little late in the day for your papers and so forth anyway?' Cosca gestured towards the windows, flecked and spotted with frozen blood. 'The Gurkish are coming, remember? If you've scores to settle, get them settled now, before our Kantic friends tear up all the bills. When plans fail, swift action must serve, eh, Superior?' He reached behind his head, unbuckled his mask, and let it drop to the floor. 'Time to laugh in your enemy's face! To risk all on one final throw! You can pick up the pieces afterward. If they don't go back together, well, what's the difference? Tomorrow we might all be living in a different world.'

Or dying in one. Not the way we wanted it, maybe, but he is right. Perhaps we might borrow one final shred of Colonel Glokta's dash before the game is over? 'I hope I can still count on your help?'

Cosca clapped him on the shoulder and sent a painful shudder through his twisted back. 'A noble last effort, against all the odds? Of course! Though I should mention that I usually charge double once the diabolical arts are involved.'

'How does triple sound?' *After all, Valint and Balk have deep pockets.*

Cosca's grin grew wider. 'It sounds well.'

'And your men? Are they reliable?'

'They are still waiting for four fifths of their pay. Until they receive it I would trust any one of them with my life.'

'Good. Then we are prepared.' Glokta worked his aching foot around in his boot. *Just a little further now, my toeless beauty. Just a few shuddering steps more, and one way or another, we both can rest.* He opened his fingers and let Goyle's

confession float down to the frosty floor. 'To the University, then! His Eminence has never liked to be kept waiting.'

Open the Box

Logen could feel the doubt in the men around him, could see the worry on their faces, in the way they held their weapons, and he didn't blame them. A man can be fearless on his own doorstep, against enemies he understands, but take him long miles over the salty sea to strange places he never dreamed of, he'll take fright at every empty doorway. And there were an awful lot of those, now.

The city of white towers, where Logen had hurried after the First of the Magi, amazed at the scale of the buildings, the strangeness of the people, the sheer quantity of both, had become a maze of blackened ruins. They crept down empty streets, lined with the outsize skeletons of burned-out houses, charred rafters stabbing at the sky. They crept across empty squares, scattered with rubble and dusted with ash. Always the sounds of battle echoed, ghostly – near, far, all around them.

It was as if they crept through hell.

'How d'you fight in this?' whispered the Dogman.

Logen wished he had an answer. Fighting in forests, in mountains, in valleys, they'd done it all a hundred times, and knew the rules, but this? His eyes flickered nervously over the gaping windows and doorways, the piles of fallen stones. So many places for an enemy to hide.

All Logen could do was aim at the House of the Maker and hope for the best. What would happen when they got there, he wasn't sure, but it seemed a safe bet there'd be blood involved. Nothing that would do anyone the slightest good, most likely, but the fact was he'd said go, and the one thing a leader can't do is change his mind.

The clamour of fighting was getting louder, now, and louder. The stink of smoke and anger was picking at his nose, scratching at his throat. The scored metal of the Maker's sword was slippery in his sweaty palm. He crept low to the ground, over a heap of rubble and along beside a shattered wall, his hand held flat behind him to say go careful. He eased up to the edge, and peered around it.

The Agriont rose up just ahead, great walls and towers black against the white sky, a second set reflected in the moat below. A lot of men were gathered near the water, crowded up and down the cobbled space as far as Logen could see. It didn't take a sharp mind to realise they were Gurkish. Arrows flitted up towards the battlements, bolts flitted back down, spinning from the cobbles, sticking wobbling into wooden screens.

Not thirty strides away they'd drawn up a line, facing into the city. A good, clean line, bristling with spears, set out on either side of a tall standard, golden letters twinkling on it. A tough-looking line of hard men, well armed and well armoured, nothing like the rubbish they'd faced outside the walls. Logen didn't reckon shouting was going to get this lot moving anywhere.

Except straight at him, maybe.

'Whoa,' muttered the Dogman as he crept up. A few more Northmen followed him, spreading out in the mouth of the street, staring stupidly around.

Logen waved an arm at them. 'Might be best if we stay out of sight for the —'

An officer in the midst of the Gurkish line barked in his harsh tongue, pointed towards them with his curved sword. Armour rattled as the men set their spears.

'Ah, shit,' hissed Logen. They came forward, fast, but organised. A mass of them, and bristling with bright, sharp, deadly metal.

There are only three choices when you get charged. Run away, stand, or charge yourself. Running away isn't usually a bad option, but given the way the rest of the boys were feeling, if they ran they wouldn't stop running until they fell in the sea. If they stood, all in a puzzled mess from coming through the city, the chances were good that they'd break, and that would leave some dead and do nothing for the rest. Which left one choice, and that's no choice at all.

Two charges in one day. Shitty luck, that, but there was no use crying about it. You have to be realistic about these things.

Logen started running. Not the way he wanted to, but forward, out from the buildings and across the cobbles towards the moat. He didn't give too much thought to whether anyone was following. He was too busy screaming and waving his sword around. The first into the killing, just like in the old days. A fitting end for the Bloody-Nine. Be a good song, maybe, if anyone could be bothered finding a tune for it. He gritted his teeth, waiting for the terrible impact.

Then a crowd of Union soldiers came pouring from the buildings on the left, shouting like madmen themselves. The Gurkish charge faltered, their line began to break up, spears swinging wildly as men turned to face the sudden threat. An unexpected bonus, and no mistake.

The Union crashed into the end of the line. Men screeched and bellowed, metal shrieked on metal, weapons flashed, bodies dropped, and Logen fell into the midst of it. He slid past a wobbling spear, slashed at a Gurkish soldier. He missed and hit another, sent him screaming, blood bubbling down chain-mail. He rammed into a third with his shoulder and flung him on his back, stomped on the side of his jaw and felt it crunch under his boot.

The Gurkish officer who'd led the charge was only a stride away, his sword ready. Logen heard a bow string behind and an arrow took the officer near the collar bone. He dragged in a shuddering breath to scream, half spinning round. Logen chopped a deep gash through his back-plate, spots of blood jumping. Men crunched into the remains of the line around him. A spear shaft bent up and shattered sending splinters flying in Logen's face. Someone roared right next to him and made his ear buzz. He jerked his head away to see a Carl throw a desperate hand up, a curved sword sliced into it and sent a thumb spinning. Logen hacked the Gurkish soldier who'd swung it in the face, the heavy blade of the Maker's sword catching him across the cheek and splitting his skull wide.

A spear flashed at him. Logen tried to turn sideways, gasped as the point slid through his shirt and down his right side, leaving a cold line under his ribs. The man who held it stumbled on towards him, moving too quick to stop. Logen stabbed him right through, just under his breastplate, ended up blinking in his face. A Union soldier with a patchy ginger beard on his cheeks.

The man frowned, puzzled at seeing another white face. 'Wha . . .' he croaked, clutching at him. Logen tore away, one hand pressed to his side. It was wet there. He wondered if the spear had nicked him or run him right through. He wondered if it had killed him already, and he had just a last few bloody moments left.

Then something hit him on the back of his head and he was reeling, bellowing, not knowing what was happening. His limbs were made of mud. The world wobbled about, full of flying dirt and flying edges. He hacked at something, kicked at something else. He grappled with someone, snarling, tore his hand free and fumbled out a knife, stabbed at a neck, black blood flowing. The sounds of battle roared and hummed in his ears. A man staggered past with part of his face hanging off. Logen could see right inside his mangled mouth from the side, bits of teeth falling out.

The cut down his side burned, and burned, and sucked his breath out. The knock on his head made the pulse pound in his skull, made the blurry world slide from side to side. His mouth was full of the salt metal taste of blood. He felt a touch on his shoulder and lurched around, teeth bared, fingers tight round the grip of the Maker's blade.

Dogman let go of him and held up his hands. 'It's me! It's me!'

Logen saw who it was. But it wasn't his hand that held the sword, now, and the Bloody-Nine saw only work that needed doing.



What a curious flock this crippled shepherd has acquired. Two dozen fake Practicals followed Glokta through the deserted lanes of the Agriont, Nicomo Cosca, infamous soldier of fortune, swaggering at their head. My hopes all entrusted to the world's least trustworthy man. One of them dragged the bound and gagged Superior Goyle stumbling along by a rope. Like an unwilling dog being taken for a walk. Ardee West shuffled in their midst, her white dress stained with the filth of the sewers and the blood of several men, her face stained with darkening bruises and a haunted slackness. No doubt the result of the several horrors she has already witnessed today. All capering through the Agriont after the Inquisition's only crippled Superior. A merry dance to hell, accompanied by the sounds of distant battle.

He lurched to a sudden halt. An archway beside him led through into the Square of Marshals and, for some reason beyond his comprehension, the whole wide space had been covered with sawdust. In the middle of that yellow-white expanse, perfectly recognisable even over this distance, the First of the Magi stood, waiting. Beside him was the dark-skinned woman who had nearly drowned Glokta in his bath. *My two favourite people in all the world, I do*

declare.

'Bayaz,' hissed Glokta.

'No time for that.' Cosca caught him by the elbow and pulled him away, and the First of the Magi and his sullen companion passed out of view. Glokta limped on, down the narrow lane, winced as he turned a corner, and found himself staring directly into the face of his old acquaintance Jezal dan Luthar. *Or, should I say, the High King of the Union. I am painfully honoured.*

'Your Majesty,' he said, lowering his head and causing a particularly unpleasant stabbing through his neck. Cosca, just appearing beside him, gave an extravagant bow, reaching for his cap to sweep it from his head. It was gone. He shrugged his shoulders apologetically, and tugged at his greasy forelock.

Luthar frowned at him, and at each member of his strange group as they appeared. Someone seemed to be lurking at the back of the royal entourage. A robe of black and gold in amongst all that polished steel. Could that be . . . *our old friend the High Justice? But surely he is in frozen pieces*—Then Ardee shuffled around the corner.

Luthar's eyes went wide. 'Ardee . . .'

'Jezal . . .' She looked every bit as amazed as he did. 'I mean—'

And the air was ripped apart by a colossal explosion.

The Middleway was not what it used to be.

West and his staff rode northwards in stunned silence. Their horses' hooves tapped at the cracked road. A sorry bird cheeped from the bare rafters of a burned-out house. Someone in a side street squealed for help. From the west the vague sounds of fighting still echoed, like the noise of a distant sporting event, but one with no winners. Fire had swept through the centre of the city, turning whole swathes of buildings to blackened shells, the trees to grey claws, the gardens to patches of withered slime. Corpses were the only addition. Corpses of every size and description.

The Four Corners was a slaughter-yard, scattered with all the ugly garbage of war, bounded by the ruined remains of some of Adua's finest buildings. Near at hand, the wounded were laid out in long rows on the dusty ground, coughing, groaning, calling for water, bloody surgeons moving helplessly among them.

A few grim soldiers were already piling the Gurkish dead into formless heaps, masses of tangled arms, legs, faces. They were watched over by a tall man with his hands clenched behind his back. General Kroy, always quick to put things in order. His black uniform was smudged with grey ash, one torn sleeve flapping around his wrist. The fighting must have been savage indeed to make a mark on his perfect presentation, but his salute was unaffected. It could not have been more impeccable if they stood on a parade ground.

'Progress, General?'

'Bitter fighting through the central district, Lord Marshal! Our cavalry broke through this morning and we took them by surprise. Then they counterattacked while we were waiting for the foot. I swear, this weary patch

of ground has changed hands a dozen times. But we have the Four Corners, now! They're fighting hard for every stride, but we're driving them back towards Arnault's wall. Look at that, now!' He pointed to a pair of Gurkish standards leaning against a length of crumbling masonry, their golden symbols gleaming in the midst of that drab destruction. 'They'll make a fine centrepiece to anyone's living room, eh, sir?'

West could not stop his eyes wandering down to a group of groaning wounded lolling against the wall below. 'I wish you joy of them. The Agriont?'

'The news is less good there, I'm afraid. We're pushing them hard, but the Gurkish are up in numbers. They still have the citadel entirely surrounded.'

'Push harder, General!'

Kroy snapped out another salute. 'Yes, sir, we'll break them, don't you worry. Might I ask how General Poulder is doing with the docks?'

'The docks are back in our hands, but General Poulder . . . is dead.'

There was a pause. 'Dead?' Kroy's face had turned deathly pale. 'But how did he—'

There was a rumble, like thunder in the distance, and the horses shied, pawed at the ground. West's face, and Kroy's, and the faces of their officers, all turned as one to the north. There, over the tops of the blackened ruins at the edge of the square, a great mass of dust was rising high above the Agriont.

The bright world spun and throbbed, full of the beautiful song of battle, the wonderful taste of blood, the fine and fruitful stink of death. In the midst of it, no further than arms length away, a small man stood, watching him.

To come so close to the Bloody-Nine? To ask for death as surely as to step into the searing fire. To beg for death. To demand it.

Something about his pointed teeth seemed familiar. A faint memory, from long ago. But the Bloody-Nine pushed it away, shook it off, sunk it in the bottomless sea. It meant nothing to him who men were, or what they had done. He was the Great Leveller, and all men were equal before him. His only care was to turn the living into the dead, and it was past time for the good work to begin. He raised the sword.

The earth shook.

He stumbled, and a great noise washed over him, tore between the dead men and the living, split the world in half. He felt it knock something loose inside his skull. He snarled as he righted himself, lifted the blade high . . .

Except the arm would not move.

'Bastard . . .' snarled the Bloody-Nine, but the flames were all burned out. It was Logen who turned towards the noise.

A vast cloud of grey smoke was rising up from the wall of the Agriont a few hundred strides away. Spinning specks flew up high, high above it leaving arching trails of brown dust in the sky, like the tentacles of some vast sea-monster. One seemed to reach its peak just above them. Logen watched it fall. It had looked like a pebble at first. As it tumbled slowly down he realised it was a chunk of masonry the size of a cart.

'Shit,' said Grim. There was nothing else to say. It crashed through the side

of a building right in the midst of the fight. The whole house burst apart, flinging broken bodies in every direction. A broken timber whirled past the Dogman and splashed into the moat. Specks of grit nipped at the back of Logen's head as he flung himself to the ground.

Choking dirt billowed out across the road. He retched, one hand over his face. He wobbled up to standing, the dusty world lurching around him, using his sword as a crutch, ears still ringing from the noise, not sure who he was, let alone where.

The bones had gone right out of the battle by the moat. Men coughed, stared, wandered in the gloom. There were a lot of bodies, Northmen, Gurkish, Union, all mixed up together. Logen saw a dark-skinned man staring at him, blood running down his dusty face from a cut above one eye.

Logen lifted his sword, gave a throaty roar, tried to charge and ended up staggering sideways and nearly falling over. The Gurkish soldier dropped his spear and ran off into the murk.

There was a second deafening detonation, this one even closer, off to the west. A sudden blast of wind ripped at Jezal's hair, nipped at his eyes. Swords rang from sheaths. Men stared up, faces slack with shock.

'We must go,' piped Gorst, taking a firm grip on Jezal's elbow.

Glokta and his henchmen were already making off down a cobbled lane, as quickly as the Superior could limp. Ardee gave one brief look over her shoulder, eyes wide.

'Wait . . .' Seeing her like that had given Jezal a sudden and painful rush of longing. The idea of her in the thrall of that disgusting cripple was almost too much to bear. But Gorst was having none of it.

'The palace, your Majesty.' He ushered Jezal away towards the park without a backward glance, the rest of the royal bodyguard clattering after. Fragments of stone began to click off the roofs around them, to bounce from the road, to ping from the armour of the Knights of the Body.

'They are coming,' muttered Marovia, staring grimly off towards the Square of Marshals.

Ferro squatted, hands held over her head, the monstrous echoes still booming from the high white walls. A stone the size of a man's head fell out of the sky and burst apart on the ground a few strides away, black gravel scattering across the pale sawdust. A boulder ten times as big crashed through the roof of a building, sent glass tinkling from shattered windows. Dust billowed out from the streets and into the square in grey clouds. Gradually the noise faded. The man-made hailstorm rattled to a stop, and there was a pregnant silence.

'What now?' she growled at Bayaz.

'Now they will come.' There was a crash somewhere in the streets, the sound of men shouting, then a long scream suddenly cut off. He turned towards her, his jaw working nervously. 'Once we begin, do not move from the spot. Not a hair. The circles have been carefully—'

'Keep your mind on your own part, Magus.'

'Then I will. Open the box, Ferro.'

She stood, frowning, her fingertips rubbing at her thumbs. Once it was opened, there would be no going back, she felt it.

'Now!' snapped Bayaz. 'Now, if you want your vengeance!'

'Sssss.' But the time for going back was far behind her. She squatted down, laying her hand on the cool metal of the lid. A dark path was the only choice, and always had been. She found the hidden catch and pressed it in. The box swung silently open, and that strange thrill seeped, then flowed, then poured out over her and made the air catch in her throat.

The Seed lay inside, nestling on its metal coils, a dull, grey, unremarkable lump. She closed her fingers round it. Lead-heavy and ice-cold, she lifted it from the box.

'Good.' But Bayaz was wincing as he watched her, face twisted with fear and disgust. She held it out towards him and he flinched back. There were beads of sweat across his forehead. 'Come no closer!'

Ferro slammed the box shut. Two Union guards, clad in full armour, were backing into the square, heavy swords in their fists. There was a fear in the way they moved, as if they were retreating from an army. But only one man rounded the corner. A man in white armour, worked with designs of shining metal. His dark face was young, and smooth, and beautiful, but his eyes seemed old. Ferro had seen such a face before, in the wastelands near Dagoska.

An Eater.

The two guards came at him together, one shouting a shrill battle-cry. The Eater shrugged effortlessly around their swords, came forward in a sudden blur, caught one of the Union men with a careless flick of his open hand. There was a hollow clang as it caved in his shield and breastplate both, lifted him flailing into the air. He crunched down some twenty strides from where he had been standing, rolled over and over leaving dark marks in the pale sawdust. He flopped to rest not far from Ferro, coughed out a long spatter of blood and was still.

The other guard backed away. The Eater looked at him, a sadness on his perfect face. The air around him shimmered, briefly, the man's sword clattered down, he gave a long squeal and clutched at his head. It burst apart, showering fragments of skull and flesh across the walls of the white building beside him. The headless corpse slumped to the ground. There was a pause.

'Welcome to the Agriont!' shouted Bayaz.

Ferro's eyes were drawn up by a flash of movement. High above, a figure in white armour dashed across a roof. They made an impossible leap across the wide gap to the next building and vanished from sight. In the street below a woman flowed out of the shadows and into the square, dressed in glittering chain-mail. Her hips swayed as she sauntered forwards, a happy smile on her flawless face, a long spear carried loose in one hand. Ferro swallowed, shifted her fist around the Seed, gripping it tight.

Part of a wall collapsed behind her, blocks of stone tumbling out across the square. A huge man stepped through the ragged gap, a great length of wood in his hands, studded with black iron, his armour and his long beard coated in

dust. Two others followed, a man and a woman, all with the same smooth skin, the same young faces and the same old, black eyes. Ferro scowled round at them as she slid her sword out, the cold metal glinting. Useless, maybe, but holding it was some kind of comfort.

‘Welcome to you all!’ called Bayaz. ‘I have been waiting for you, Mamun!’

The first of the Eaters frowned as he stepped carefully over the headless corpse. ‘And we for you.’ White shapes flitted from the roofs of the buildings, thumped down into the square in crouches, and stood tall. Four of them, one to each corner. ‘Where is that creeping shadow, Yulwei?’

‘He could not be with us.’

‘Zacharus?’

‘Mired in the ruined west, trying to heal a corpse with a bandage.’

‘Cawneil?’

‘Too much in love with what she used to be to spare a thought for what comes.’

‘You are left all alone, then, in the end, apart from this.’ Mamun turned his empty gaze on Ferro. ‘She is a strange one.’

‘She is, and exceptionally difficult, but not without resources.’ Ferro scowled, and said nothing. If anything needed saying, she could talk with her sword. ‘Ah, well.’ Bayaz shrugged. ‘I have always found myself my own best council.’

‘What choice have you? You destroyed your own order with your pride, and your arrogance, and your hunger for power.’ More figures stepped from doorways round the square, strolled unhurried from the streets. Some strutted like lords. Some held hands like lovers. ‘Power is all you ever cared for, and you are left without even that. The First of the Magi, and the last.’

‘So it would seem. Does that not please you?’

‘I take no pleasure in this, Bayaz. This is what must be done.’

‘Ah. A righteous battle? A holy duty? A crusade, perhaps? Will God smile on your methods, do you think?’

Mamun shrugged. ‘God smiles on results.’ More figures in white armour spilled into the square and spread out around its edge. They moved with careless grace, with effortless strength, with bottomless arrogance. Ferro frowned around at them, the Seed clutched tight at one hip, her sword at the other.

‘If you have a plan,’ she hissed. ‘Now might be the time.’

But the First of the Magi only watched as they were surrounded, the muscles twitching on the side of his face, his hands clenching and unclenching by his sides. ‘A shame that Khalul himself could not pay a visit, but you have brought some friends with you, I see.’

‘One hundred, as I promised. Some few have other tasks about the city. They send their regrets. But most of us are here for you. More than enough.’ The Eaters were still. They stood facing inwards, spread out in a great ring with the First of the Magi at their centre. Ferro Maljinn felt no fear, of course.

But these were poor odds.

‘Answer me one thing,’ called Mamun, ‘since we are come to the end. Why did you kill Juvens?’

‘Juvens? Ha! He thought to make the world a better place with smiles and

good intentions. Good intentions get you nothing, and the world does not improve without a fight. I say I killed no one.' Bayaz looked sideways at Ferro. His eyes were feverish bright, now, his scalp glistened with sweat. 'But what does it matter who killed who a thousand years ago? What matters is who dies today.'

'True. Now, at last, you will be judged.' Slowly, very slowly, the circle of Eaters began to contract, stepping gently forward as one, drawing softly inwards.

The First of the Magi gave a grim smile. 'Oh, there will be a judgement here, Mamun, on that you can depend. The magic has drained from the world. My Art is a shadow of what it was. But you forgot, while you were gorging yourselves on human meat, that knowledge is the root of power. High Art I learned from Juvens. Making I took from Kanedias.'

'You will need more than that to defeat us.'

'Of course. For that I need some darker medicine.'

The air around Bayaz' shoulders shimmered. The Eaters paused, some of them raised their arms in front of their faces. Ferro narrowed her eyes, but there was only the gentlest breath of wind. A subtle breeze, that washed out from the First of the Magi in a wave, that lifted the sawdust from the stones and carried it out in a white cloud to the very edge of the Square of Marshals.

Mamun looked down, and frowned. Set into the stone beneath his feet, metal shone dully in the thin sunlight. Circles, and lines, and symbols, and circles within circles, covering the entire wide space in a single vast design.

'Eleven wards, and eleven wards reversed,' said Bayaz. 'Iron. Quenched in salt water. An improvement suggested by Kanedias' researches. Glustrod used raw salt. That was his mistake.'

Mamun looked up, the icy calmness vanished from his face. 'You cannot mean . . .' His black eyes flickered to Ferro, then down to her hand, clenched tight around the Seed. 'No! The First Law—'

'The First Law?' The Magus showed his teeth. 'Rules are for children. This is war, and in war the only crime is to lose. The word of Euz?' Bayaz' lip curled. 'Hah! Let him come forth and stop me!'

'Enough!' One of the Eaters leaped forward, flashing across the metal circles towards their centre. Ferro gasped as the stone in her hand turned suddenly, terribly cold. The air about Bayaz twisted, danced, as though he was reflected in a rippling pool.

The Eater sprang up, mouth open, the bright blade of his sword shining. Then he was gone. So were two others behind him. A long spray of blood was smeared across the ground where one of them had been standing. Ferro's eyes followed it, growing wider and wider. Her mouth fell open.

The building that had stood behind them had a giant, gaping hole torn out of it from ground to dizzy roof. A great canyon lined with broken stone and hanging plaster, with splintered spars and dangling glass. Dust showered from the shattered edges and into the yawning hole below. A flock of torn papers fluttered down through the empty air. From out of the carnage a thin and agonised screaming came. A sobbing. A screech of pain. Many voices. The voices of those who had been using that building as a refuge.

Poor luck for them.

Bayaz' mouth slowly curled up into a smile. 'It works,' he breathed.

Dark Paths

Jezal hurried through the tall archway and into the gardens of the palace, his Knights around him. It was remarkable that High Justice Marovia had been able to keep pace with them on their dash through the Agriont, but the old man scarcely seemed out of breath. 'Seal the gates!' he bellowed. 'The gates!'

The huge doors were heaved shut, two beams the thickness of ships' masts swung into position behind them. Jezal allowed himself to breathe a little easier. There was a reassuring feeling to the weight of those gates, to the height and thickness of the walls of the palace compound, to the sizeable host of well trained and armoured men defending it.

Marovia laid his hand gently on Jezal's shoulder, began to steer him down the cobbled path towards the nearest door into the palace. 'We should find the safest place possible, your Majesty—'

Jezal shook him off. 'Would you lock me in my bedroom? Or should I hide in the cellar? I will remain here, and co-ordinate the defence of—'

A long, blood-chilling scream came from the other side of the wall and echoed around the bare gardens. It was as if that shriek made a hole in him through which all confidence quickly leaked away. The gates rattled slightly against the mighty beams, and the notion of hiding in the cellar gained appeal with astonishing speed.

'A line!' barked Gorst's shrill voice. 'To the King!' A wall of heavily-armoured men clustered instantly around Jezal, swords drawn, shields raised. Others kneeled in front, pulling bolts from quivers, turning the cranks of their heavy flatbows. All eyes were fixed on the mighty double doors. They rattled gently again, wobbled slightly.

'Down there!' someone called from the walls above. 'Down—' There was a screech and an armoured man plummeted from the battlements and crunched into the turf. His body trembled, then fell limp.

'How . . .' someone muttered.

A white figure dived from the walls, gracefully turned over in the air and thudded onto the pathway in front of them. It stood up. A dark-skinned man, arrayed in armour of white and gold, his face smooth as a boy's. He held a spear of dark wood with a long, curved blade in one hand. Jezal stared at him, and he looked back, expressionless. There was something in those black eyes, or rather there was something missing from them. Jezal knew that this was not a man. It was an Eater. A breaker of the Second Law. One of Khalul's Hundred Words, come to settle ancient scores with the First of the Magi. It seemed, rather unfairly, that their score had somehow come to include Jezal. The Eater raised one hand, as if in blessing.

'May God admit us all to heaven.'

'Loose!' squealed Gorst. Flatbows rattled and popped. A couple of bolts glanced off the Eater's armour, a couple more thudded into flesh, one under

the breastplate, another in the shoulder. One bolt caught it right through the face, the flights sticking out just below the eye. Any man should have dropped dead before them. The Eater sprang forwards with shocking speed.

One of the Knights raised his flatbow in a feeble attempt to defend himself. The spear split it in two and sliced him cleanly in half at the belly, chopped into another man with an echoing clang and sent him tumbling through the air into a tree ten strides away. Fragments of dented armour and splintered wood flew. The first Knight made a strange whistling sound as his top half tumbled to the path, showering his dumbstruck comrades with gore.

Jezal was jostled back, could see nothing more than flashes of movement between his bodyguards. He heard screams and groans, clashing metal, saw swords glinting, gouts of blood flying. An armoured body flew into the air, flopping like a rag-doll, crunched into a wall on the other side of the gardens.

The bodies swayed apart. The Eater was surrounded, swinging its spear in blinding circles. One ripped into a man's shoulder and knocked him shrieking to the ground, the shaft splintering with the force of the blow and the blade spinning away edge-first into the turf. A Knight charged in from behind and spitted the Eater through the back, the glittering point of his halberd sliding bloodless through the white armour on its chest. Another Knight struck its arm off with an axe and dust showered from the stump. The Eater screeched, hit him across the chest with a backhanded blow that crushed his breastplate and drove him sighing into the dirt.

A sword-cut squealed through the white armour, sending dust flying up as if from a beaten carpet. Jezal stared dumbly as the Eater reeled towards him. Gorst shoved him out of the way, growling as he brought his long steel round to hack deep into the Eater's neck with a meaty thud. It flailed, silently, its head hanging off by a flap of gristle, brown dust pouring from its yawning wounds. It clutched at Gorst with its remaining hand and he staggered, face twisted with pain, sank to his knees as it wrenched his arm around.

'Here's heaven, bastard!' Jezal's sword chopped through the last bit of neck and the Eaters' head dropped onto the grass. It let go of Gorst and he clutched at his mangled forearm, the shape of the Eater's hand dented into his heavy armour. The headless body slowly toppled over. 'Cursed thing!' Jezal took one step and kicked its head across the garden, watched it bounce and roll into a flower bed leaving a trail of dust through the grass. Three men stood over the body, their heavy breath echoing from inside their helmets, their swords flashing in the sun as they hacked it into pieces. Its fingers were still twitching.

'They're made of dust,' someone whispered.

Marovia frowned at the remains. 'Some are. Some bleed. Each one is different. We should get inside the palace!' he shouted as he hurried across the gardens. 'There will be more of them!'

'More?' Twelve Knights of the Body lay dead. Jezal swallowed as he counted their broken and bloody, dented and battered corpses. The best men the Union had to offer, scattered around the palace gardens like heaps of scrap metal among the brown leaves. 'More? But how do we—?' The gates shuddered. Jezal's head snapped towards them, the blind courage of the fight fading quickly and sick panic rushing in behind it.

'This way!' roared Marovia, holding open a door and beckoning desperately. It was not as though there were other choices. Jezal rushed towards him, caught one gilded boot with the other three steps in, and went sprawling painfully on his face. There was a cracking, a tearing, a squealing of wood and metal behind. He clawed his way onto his back to see the gates torn apart in a cloud of flying timber. Broken planks spun through the air, bent nails pinged from the pathways, splinters settled gently across the lawns.

A woman sauntered through the open gateway, the air still shimmering gently around her tall, thin body. A pale woman with long, golden hair. Another walked beside her, just the same except that her left side was splattered from head to toe with red blood. Two women, happy smiles on their beautiful, perfect, identical faces. One of them slapped a Knight Herald across the head as he charged up, tearing his winged helmet from his shattered skull and sending it spinning high into the air. The other turned her black, empty eyes on Jezal. He struggled up and ran, wheezing with fear, slid through the door beside Marovia and into the shadowy hallway, lined with ancient arms and armour.

Gorst and a few Knights of the Body tumbled through after him. Over their shoulders the one-sided battle in the gardens continued. A man raised a flatbow only to explode in a shower of blood. An armoured corpse crashed into a Knight just as he turned to run, sent him hurtling sideways through a window, sword spinning from his hand. Another ran towards them, arms pumping, tumbled down a few strides away, thrashing on the ground, flames spurting from the joints in his armour.

'Help me!' someone wailed. 'Help me! Help—' Gorst slammed the heavy doors shut with his one good arm, one of his fellows dropped the thick bar into the brackets. They tore old polearms from the walls, one with a tattered battle-flag attached, and started wedging them in the doorway.

Jezal was already backing away, cold sweat tickling at his skin under his armour, gripping tight to the hilt of his sword more for reassurance than defence. His drastically denuded entourage stumbled back with him – Gorst, Marovia, and but five others, their gasping, horrified breath echoing in the dim corridor, all staring towards the door.

'The last gate did not hold them,' Jezal whispered. 'Why should this one?'

No one answered.

'Keep your wits about you, gentlemen,' said Glokta. 'The door, please.'

The fat mercenary took his axe to the front gate of the University. Splinters flew. It wobbled at the first blow, shuddered at the second, tore open at the third. The one-eyed dwarf slithered through, a knife in either hand, closely followed by Cosca, sword drawn.

'Clear,' came his Styrian drawl from inside, 'if fusty.'

'Excellent.' Glokta looked at Ardee. 'It might be best if you stayed towards the back.'

She gave an exhausted nod. 'I was thinking the same.'

He limped painfully over the threshold, black-clad mercenaries pouring

through the doorway behind him, the last of them dragging Goyle reluctantly by his bandaged wrists. *And along the very paths I took the first time I visited this heap of dust, so many months ago. Before the vote. Before Dagoska, even. How lovely to be back . . .*

Down the dark hallway, past the dirty paintings of forgotten Adepti, tortured floorboards groaning under the boots of the mercenaries. Glokta lurched out into the wide dining hall.

The freak-show of Practicals was scattered about the dim chamber just as it had been when he last visited. The two identical men from Suljuk, with their curved swords. The tall, thin one, the dark men with their axes, the vast Northman with the ruined face. And so on. A good score of them in all. *Have they been sitting here all this time, I wonder, just being menacing to each other?*

Vitari was already up from her chair. 'I thought I told you to keep away from here, cripple.'

'I tried, indeed I did, but I could not banish the memory of your smile.'

'Ho, ho, Shylo!' Cosca strolled out from the hallway, twiddling at the waxed ends of his moustache with one hand, sword drawn in the other.

'Cosca! Don't you ever die?' Vitari let a cross-shaped knife tumble from her hand to clatter across the boards on the end of a long chain. 'Seems a day for men I hoped I'd seen the last of.' Her Practicals spread out around her, swords sliding from sheaths, axes, maces, spears scraping off the table. The mercenaries clomped into the hall, their own weapons at the ready. Glokta cleared his throat. 'I think it would be better for all concerned if we could discuss this like civilised—'

'You see anyone civilised?' snarled Vitari.

A fair point. One Practical sprang up on the table making the cutlery jump. The one-handed mercenary waved his hook in the air. The two heavily-armed groups edged towards each other. It looked very much as if Cosca and his hired hands would be earning their pay. *A merry bloodbath I daresay it will be, and the outcome of a bloodbath is notoriously hard to predict. All in all, I would rather not take the gamble.*

'A shame about your children! A shame for them, that there's no one civilised around!'

Vitari's orange eyebrows drew furiously inwards. 'They're far away!'

'Oh, I'm afraid not. Two girls and a boy? Beautiful, flaming red hair, just like their mother's?' *Which gate would they go through? The Gurmish came from the west, so . . .* 'They were stopped at the east gate, and taken into custody.' Glokta stuck out his bottom lip. 'Protective custody. These are dangerous times for children to be wandering the streets, you know.'

Even with her mask on Glokta could see her horror. 'When?' she hissed.

When would a loving mother send her children to safety? 'Why, the very day the Gurmish arrived, of course, you know that.' The way her eyes widened told him that he had guessed right. Now to twist the blade. 'Don't worry though, they're tucked up safe. Practical Severard is acting as nurse. But if I don't come back . . .'

'You wouldn't hurt them.'

'What is it with everyone today? Lines I won't cross? People I won't hurt?' Glokta showed his most revolting leer. 'Children? Hope, and prospects, and all

that happy life ahead of them? I despise the little bastards!’ He shrugged his twisted shoulders. ‘But perhaps you know me better. If you’re keen to play dice with your children’s lives, I suppose we can find out. Or we could reach an understanding, as we did in Dagoska.’

‘Shit on this,’ growled one of the Practicals, hefting his axe and taking a step forward. *And the atmosphere of violence lurches another dizzy step towards the brink . . .*

Vitari shoved out her open hand. ‘Don’t move.’

‘You’ve got children, so what? Means nothing to me. It’ll mean nothing to Sult eeeeeee—’ There was a flash of metal, the jingling of a chain, and the Practical staggered forward, blood pouring from his opened throat.

Vitari’s cross-shaped knife slapped back into her palm and her eyes flicked back to Glokta. ‘An understanding?’

‘Exactly. You stay here. We go past. You didn’t see nothing, as they say in the older parts of town. You know well enough that you can’t trust Sult. He left you to the dogs in Dagoska, didn’t he? And he’s all done, anyway. The Gurkish are knocking at the door. Time we tried something new, don’t you think?’

Vitari’s mask shifted as she worked her mouth. *Thinking, thinking.* The eyes of her killers sparkled, the blades of their weapons glinted. *Don’t call the bluff, bitch, don’t you dare . . .*

‘Alright!’ She gestured with her arm and the Practicals edged unhappily back, still glaring at the mercenaries across the room. Vitari nodded her spiky head towards a doorway at the end of the chamber. ‘Down that hall, down the stairs at the end, and there’s a door. A door with black iron rivets.’

‘Excellent.’ *A few words can be more effective than a lot of blades, even in such times as these.* Glokta began to hobble away, Cosca and his men following.

Vitari frowned after them, her eyes deadly slits. ‘If you so much as touch my —’

‘Yes, yes.’ Glokta waved his hand. ‘My terror is boundless.’

There was a moment of stillness, as the remains of the gutted building settled across one side of the Square of Marshals. The Eaters stood, as shocked as Ferro, a circle of amazement. Bayaz appeared to be the only one not horrified by the scale of the destruction. His harsh chuckling echoed out and bounced back from the walls. ‘It works!’ he shouted.

‘No!’ screamed Mamun, and the Hundred Words came rushing forward.

Closer they came, the polished blades of their beautiful weapons flashing, their hungry mouths hanging open, their white teeth gleaming. Closer yet, streaming inwards with terrible speed, shrieking out a chorus of hate that made even Ferro’s blood turn cold.

But Bayaz only laughed. ‘Let the judgement begin!’

Ferro growled through clenched teeth as the Seed burned cold at her palm. A mighty blast of wind swept out across the square from its centre, sent Eaters tumbling like skittles, rolling and flailing. It shattered every window, ripped open every door, stripped the roofs of every building bare.

The great inlaid gates of the Lords' Round were sucked open, then torn from their hinges, careering across the square. Tons of wood, spinning over and over like sheets of paper in a gale. They carved a crazy swathe through the helpless Eaters. They ripped white-armoured bodies apart, sending parts of limbs flying, blood and dust going up in sprays and spatters.

Ferro's hand was shimmering, and half her forearm. She gasped quick breaths as the cold spread through her veins, out to every part of her, burning at her insides. The Seed blurred and trembled as if she looked at it through fast flowing water. The wind whipped at her eyes as white figures were flung through the air like toys, writhing in a storm of shattered glass, shredded wood, splintered stone. No more than a dozen of them kept their feet, reeling, clutching at the ground, shining hair streaming from their heads, straining desperately against the blast.

One of them reached for Ferro, snarling into the wind. A woman, her glittering chain-mail thrashing, her hands clawing at the screaming air. She edged closer, and closer. A smooth, proud face, stamped with contempt.

Like the faces of the Eaters who had come for her near Dagoska. Like the faces of the slavers who had stolen her life from her. Like the face of Uthman-ul-Dosht, who had smiled at her anger and her helplessness.

Ferro's shriek of fury merged with the shrieking of the wind. She had not known that she could swing a sword so hard. The look of shock only just had time to form on the Eater's perfect face before the curved blade sliced through her outstretched arm and took her head from her shoulders. The corpse was plucked flopping away, dust flying from its gaping wounds.

The air was full of flashing shapes. Ferro stood frozen as debris whirled past her. A beam crashed through a struggling Eater's chest and carried it screaming away, high into the air, spitted like a locust on a skewer. Another burst suddenly apart in a cloud of blood and flesh, the remains sucked spiralling up into the trembling sky.

The great Eater with the beard struggled forward, lifting his huge club above his head, bellowing words no one could hear. Through the pulsing, twisting air Ferro saw Bayaz raise one eyebrow at him, saw his lips make one word.

'Burn.'

For a single moment he blazed as brightly as a star, the image of him stamped white into Ferro's eyes. Then his blackened bones were snatched away into the storm.

Only Mamun remained. He strained forwards, dragging his feet across the stone, across the iron, inch by desperate inch towards Bayaz. One armoured greave tore from his leg and flew back spinning through the maddened air, then a plate from his shoulder followed it. Torn cloth flapped. The skin on his snarling face began to ripple and stretch.

'No!' One clutching, clawing arm stretched desperately out towards the First of the Magi, fingertips straining.

'Yes,' said Bayaz, the air around his smiling face trembling like the air above the desert. The nails tore from Mamun's fingers, his outstretched arm bent back, snapped, was ripped from his shoulder. Flawless skin peeled from bone, flapping like sailcloth in a squall, brown dust flying out of his torn body like a

sandstorm over the dunes.

He was dashed suddenly away, crashed through a wall near the top of one of the tall buildings. Blocks were sucked from the edges of the ragged hole he left and tumbled outwards, upwards. They joined the whipping paper, thrashing rock, spinning planks, flailing corpses that reeled through the air around the edge of the square, faster and faster, a circle of destruction that followed the iron circles on the ground. It reached now as high as the tall buildings, and now higher yet. It flayed and scoured at everything it passed, tearing up more stone, glass, wood, metal, flesh, growing darker, faster, louder and more powerful with every moment.

Over the mindless anger of the wind Ferro could just hear Bayaz' voice.

'God smiles on results.'

Dogman got up, and shook his sore head, dirt flying from his hair. There was blood running down his arm, red on white. Seemed as if the world hadn't ended after all.

Looked like it had come close, though.

Bridge and gatehouse both had disappeared. Where they'd stood there was nothing but a great heap of broken stone and a yawning chasm carved out of the walls. That and a whole lot of dust. There were still some folk killing, but there were a lot more rolling about, choking and groaning, staggering through the rubbish, the fight all gone out of 'em. Dogman knew how they felt.

Someone was clambering up onto that mass of junk where the moat used to be, heading towards the breach. Someone with a tangled mess of hair and a long sword in one hand.

Who else but Logen Ninefingers?

'Ah, shit,' cursed Dogman. He'd got some damn fool ideas all of a sudden, had Logen, but that wasn't halfway the worst of it. There was someone following him across that bridge of rubble. Shivers, axe in hand, shield on arm, and a frown on his dirty face like a man with some dark work in mind.

'Ah, shit!'

Grim shrugged his dusty shoulders. 'Best get after 'em.'

'Aye.' Dogman jerked his thumb at Red Hat, just getting up from the ground and shaking a pile of grit off his coat. 'Get some lads together, eh?' He pointed off towards the breach with the blade of his sword. 'We're going that way.'

Damn it but he needed to piss, just like always.

Jeza! backed away down the shadowy hall, hardly daring even to breathe, feeling the sweat prickle at his palms, at his neck, at the small of his back.

'What are they waiting for?' someone muttered.

There was a gentle creaking sound above. Jeza! looked up towards the black rafters. 'Did you hear—'

A shape burst through the ceiling and hurtled down into the hallway in a white blur, flattening one of the Knights of the Body, her feet leaving two great dents in his breastplate, blood spraying from his visor.

She smiled up at Jezal. 'Greetings from the Prophet Khalul.'

'The Union!' roared another Knight, charging forward. One moment his sword whistled towards her. The next she was on the other side of the corridor. The blade clanged harmlessly into the stone floor and the man tottered forward. She seized him under the armpit, bent her knees slightly, and flung him shrieking through the ceiling. Broken plaster rained down as she grabbed another Knight round the neck and smashed his head into the wall with such force that he was left embedded in the shattered stonework, armoured legs dangling. Antique swords tumbled from their brackets and clattered down into the hallway around his limp corpse.

'This way!' The High Justice dragged Jezal, numb and helpless, towards a pair of gilded double doors. Gorst lifted up one heavy boot, gave them a shivering kick and sent them flying open. They burst through into the Chamber of Mirrors, cleared of the many tables that had stood there on Jezal's wedding night, an empty acre of polished tiles.

He ran for the far door, his slapping footfalls and his heaving, wheezing, horrified breath echoing out around the huge room. He saw himself running, distorted, in the mirrors far ahead of him, the mirrors to each side. A ludicrous sight. A clown-king, fleeing though his own palace, crown askew, his scarred face beaded with sweat, slack with terror and exhaustion. He skidded to a halt, almost fell over backwards in his haste to stop, Gorst nearly ploughing into his back.

One of the twins was sitting on the floor beside the far doorway, leaning back against the mirrored wall, reflected in it, as though she were leaning against her sister. She lifted up one languorous hand, daubed crimson with blood, and she waved.

Jezal spun towards the windows. Before he could even think of running one of them burst into the room. The other twin came tumbling through in a shower of glittering glass, rolled over and over across the polished floor, unfolded to her feet and slid to a stop.

She ran one long hand through her golden hair, yawned, and smacked her lips. 'Have you ever had the feeling that someone else is having all the fun?' she asked.

Reckonings

Red Hat had been right. There was no reason for anyone to die here. No one but the Bloody-Nine, at least. It was high time that bastard took his share of the blame.

‘Still alive,’ Logen whispered, ‘still alive.’ He crept around the corner of a white building and into the park.

He remembered this place full of people. Laughing, eating, talking. There was no laughter here now. He saw bodies scattered on the lawns. Some armoured, some not. He could hear a distant roar – far-off battle, maybe. Nothing nearer except the hissing of the wind through the bare branches and the crunching of his own footsteps in the gravel. His skin prickled as he crept towards the high wall of the palace.

The heavy doors were gone, only the twisted hinges left hanging in the archway. The gardens on the other side were full of corpses. Armoured men, all dented and bloody. There was a crowd of them on the path before the gate, crushed and broken as though they’d been smashed with a giant hammer. One was sliced clean in half, the two pieces lying in a slick of dark blood.

A man stood in the midst of all this. He had white armour on, speckled and dusted with red. A wind had blown up in the gardens, and his black hair flicked around his face, dark skin smooth and flawless as a baby’s. He was frowning down at a body near his feet, but he looked up at Logen as he came through the gate. Without hatred or fear, without happiness or sadness. Without anything much.

‘You are a long way from home,’ he said, in Northern.

‘You too.’ Logen looked into that empty face. ‘You an Eater?’

‘To that crime I must confess.’

‘We’re all guilty o’ something.’ Logen hefted his sword in one hand. ‘Shall we get to it, then?’

‘I came here to kill Bayaz. No one else.’

Logen glanced round at the ruined corpses scattered across the gardens. ‘How’s that working out for you?’

‘Once you set your mind on killing, it is hard to choose the number of the dead.’

‘That is a fact. Blood gets you nothing but more blood, my father used to tell me.’

‘A wise man.’

‘If only I’d listened.’

‘It is hard, sometimes, to know what is . . . the truth.’ The Eater lifted up his bloody right hand and frowned at it. ‘It is fitting that a righteous man should have . . . doubts.’

‘You tell me. Can’t say I know too many righteous men.’

‘I once thought I did. Now I am not sure. We must fight?’

Logen took a long breath. 'Looks that way.'

'So be it.'

He came so fast there was hardly time to lift a sword, let alone swing it. Logen threw himself out of the way but still got caught in the ribs with something – elbow, knee, shoulder. It can be hard to tell when you're flopping over and over on the grass, everything tumbling around you. He tried to get up, found that he couldn't. Raising his head an inch was almost more than he could manage. Every breath was painful. He dropped back, staring up at the white sky. Maybe he should've stayed outside the walls. Maybe he should've just let the lads rest in the trees, until after it was all settled.

The tall shape of the Eater swam into his blurry vision, black against the clouds. 'I am sorry for this. I will pray for you. I will pray for us both.' He lifted up his armoured foot.

An axe chopped into his face and sent him staggering. Logen shook the light out of his head, dragged some air in. He forced himself up onto one elbow, clutching at his side. He saw a white-armoured fist flash down and crash onto Shivers' shield. It ripped a chunk out of the edge and knocked Shivers onto his knees. An arrow pinged off the Eater's shoulder-plate and he turned, one side of his head hanging bloodily open. A second shaft stuck him neatly through the neck. Grim and the Dogman stood in the archway, their bows raised.

The Eater went pounding towards them with huge strides, the wind of his passing tearing at the grass.

'Huh,' said Grim. The Eater rammed into him with an armoured elbow. He crashed into a tree ten strides away and flopped down onto the grass. The Eater raised its other arm to chop at Dogman and a Carl stabbed a spear into him, carried him thrashing backwards. More Northmen charged through the gate, crowding round, screaming and shouting, hacking with axes and swords.

Logen rolled over, crawled across the lawn and seized hold of his sword, tearing a wet handful of grass up with it. A Carl tumbled past him, broken head covered in blood. Logen squeezed his jaws together and charged, lifting his sword in both hands.

It bit into the Eater's shoulder, sheared through his armour and split him open down as far as his chest, showering blood in the Dogman's face. Same time, almost, one of the Carls caught him full in the side with a maul, smashed his other arm and left a great dent in his breastplate.

The Eater stumbled and Red Hat hacked a gash in one of his legs. He lurched to his knees, blood spilling from his wounds and running down his dented white armour, pooling on the path underneath him. He was smiling, so far as Logen could tell with half his face hanging off. 'Free,' he whispered.

Logen raised the Maker's blade and hacked his head from his shoulders.

A wind had blown up suddenly, swirling through the stained streets, hissing out of the burned-out buildings, whipping ash and dust in West's face as he rode towards the Agriont. He had to shout over it. 'How do we fare?'

'The fight's gone out of 'em!' bellowed Brint, his hair dragged sideways by another gust. 'They're in full retreat! Seems as if they were too keen to get the

Agriont surrounded and they weren't ready for us! Now they're falling over each other to get away to the west. Still some fighting around Arnault's Wall, but Orso has them on the run in the Three Farms!'

West saw the familiar shape of the Tower of Chains over the top of a ruin, and he urged his horse towards it. 'Good! If we can just clear them away from the Agriont we'll have the best of it! Then we can . . .' He trailed off as they rounded the corner and could see all the way to the west gate of the citadel. Or, more accurately, where the west gate had once been.

It took him a moment to make sense of it. The Tower of Chains loomed up to one side of a monumental breach in the wall of the Agriont. The entire gatehouse had somehow been brought down, along with large sections of the wall to either side, the remains choking the moat below or distributed widely around the ruined streets in front.

The Gurkish were inside the Agriont. The very heart of the Union lay exposed.

Not far ahead, now, a formless battle was still raging before the citadel. West urged his horse closer, through the stragglers and the wounded, into the very shadow of the walls. He saw a line of kneeling flatbow-men deliver a withering volley into a crowd of Gurkish, bodies toppling. Beside him a man screamed into the wind as another tried to secure a tourniquet on the bloody stump of his leg.

Pike's face was grimmer even than usual. 'We should be further back, sir. This isn't safe.'

West ignored him. Each man had to do his part, without exception. 'We need a line formed up here! Where is General Kroy?' The Sergeant was no longer listening. His eyes had drifted upwards, his mouth dropping stupidly open. West turned around in his saddle.

A black column was rising above the western end of the citadel. It seemed at first to be made of swirling smoke, but as West gained some sense of scale he realised it was spinning matter. Masses of it. Countless tons of it. His eyes followed it upwards, higher and higher. The clouds themselves were moving, whipped round in a spiral at the centre, shifting in a slow circle above them. The fighting sputtered, as Union and Gurkish alike gaped up at the writhing pillar above the Agriont, the Tower of Chains a black finger in front of it, the House of the Maker an insignificant pin-prick behind.

Things began to rain from the sky. Small things, at first – splinters, dust, leaves, fragments of paper. Then a chunk of wood the size of a chair leg plummeted down and bounced spinning from the paving. A soldier squealed as a stone big as a fist smashed into his shoulder. Those who were not fighting were backing away, crouching to the ground, holding shields above their heads. The wind was growing more savage, clothes whipping in the storm, men stumbling against it, leaning into it, teeth gritted and eyes narrowed. The spinning pillar was growing wider, darker, faster, higher, touching the very sky. West could see specks around its edge dancing against the white clouds like swarms of midges on a summer's day.

Except that these were tumbling blocks of stone, wood, earth, metal, by some freak of nature sucked into the heavens and set flying. He did not know what was happening, or how. All he could do was stare.

‘Sir!’ bellowed Pike in his ear. ‘Sir, we must go!’ He seized hold of West’s bridle. A great chunk of masonry crashed into the paving not far from them. West’s horse reared up, screaming in panic. The world lurched, spun, was black, he was not sure how long for.

He was on his face, mouth full of grit. He raised his head, wobbled drunkenly up to his hands and knees, wind roaring in his ears, flying grit stinging at his face. It was dark as dusk. The air was full of tumbling rubbish. It ripped at the ground, at the buildings, at the men, huddled now like sheep, all thoughts of battle long forgotten, the living sprawled on their faces with the dead. The Tower of Chains was scoured by debris, the slates flying from its rafters, then the rafters torn away into the storm. A giant beam plummeted down and crashed into the cobbles, spun end over end, flinging corpses out of its path to slice through the wall of a house and send its roof sliding inwards.

West trembled, tears snatched away from his stinging eyes, utterly helpless. Was this how the end would come? Not covered in blood and glory at the head of a fool’s charge like General Poulder. Not passing quietly in the night like Marshal Burr. Not even hooded on the scaffold for the murder of Crown Prince Ladisla.

Crushed at random by a giant piece of rubbish falling from the sky.

‘Forgive me,’ he whispered into the tempest.

He saw the black outline of the Tower of Chains shifting. He saw it lean outwards. Chunks of stone rained down, splashed into the churning moat. The whole vast edifice lurched, bulged, and toppled outwards, with ludicrous slowness, through the flailing storm and into the city.

It broke into monstrous sections as it fell, crashing down upon the houses, crushing cowering men like ants, throwing deadly missiles in every direction.

And that was all.

There were no buildings, now, around the space that had once been the Square of Marshals. The gushing fountains, the stately statues in the Kingsway, the palaces full of soft pinks.

All snatched away.

The gilded dome had lifted from the Lords’ Round, cracked, split, and been ripped into chaff. The high wall of the Halls Martial was a ravaged ruin. The rest of the proud buildings were nothing more than shattered stumps, torn down to their very foundations. They had all melted away before Ferro’s watering eyes. Dissolved into the formless mass of fury that whirled shrieking around the First of the Magi, endlessly hungry from the ground to the very heavens.

‘Yes!’ She could hear his delighted laughter, over the noise of the storm. ‘I am greater than Juvenis! I am greater than Euz himself!’

Was this vengeance? Then how much of it would make her whole? Ferro wondered dumbly how many people had been cowering in those vanished buildings. The shimmering around the Seed was swelling, up to her shoulder, then to her neck, and it engulfed her.

The world grew quiet.

Far away the destruction continued, but it was blurred now, the sounds of it came to her muffled, as if through water. Her hand was beyond cold. She was numb to the shoulder. She saw Bayaz, smiling, his arms raised. The wind ripped about them, a wall of endless movement.

But there were shapes within it.

They grew sharper even as the rest of the world grew less distinct. They gathered around the outside of the outermost circle. Shadows. Ghosts. A hungry crowd of them.

‘Ferro . . .’ came their whispering voices.

A storm had blown up sudden in the gardens, more sudden even than the storms in the High Places. The light had faded, then stuff had started tumbling down from the dark sky. Dogman didn’t know where it was coming from and he didn’t much care. He had other things more pressing to worry on.

They dragged the wounded in through a high doorway, groaning, cursing, or worst of all, saying nothing. A couple they left outside, back to the mud already. No point wasting breath on them who were far past helping.

Logen had Grim under his armpits, the Dogman had him by the boots. His face was white as chalk but for the red blood on his lips. You could see it plain on his face that it was bad, but he didn’t complain any, not Harding Grim. Dogman wouldn’t have believed it if he had.

They set him down on the floor, in the gloom on the other side of the door. Dogman could hear things rattling against the windows, thumping against the turf outside, clattering on the roofs above. More men were carried in – broken arms and broken legs and worse besides. Shivers came after, bloody axe in one hand and his shield-arm dangling useless.

Dogman had never seen a hallway like it. The floor was made of green stone and white stone, polished up smooth and shining bright as glass. The walls were hung with great paintings. The ceiling was crusted with flowers and leaves, carved so fine they looked almost real, except that they were made from gold, glittering in the dim light leaking through the windows.

Men bent down, tending to fellows injured, giving them water and soft words, a splint or two being fixed. Logen and Shivers just stood there, giving each other a look. Not hatred, exactly, and not respect. It was hard for the Dogman to say what it was, and he didn’t much care about that either.

‘What were you thinking?’ he snapped. ‘Pissing off on your own like that? Thought you were supposed to be chief, now! That’s a poor effort, ain’t it?’

Logen only stared back, eyes gleaming in the gloom. ‘Got to help Ferro,’ he muttered, half to himself. ‘Jezal too.’

Dogman stared at him. ‘Got to help who? There’s real folk here in need o’ help.’

‘I ain’t much with the wounded.’

‘Only with the making of ’em! Go on then, Bloody-Nine, if you must. Get to it.’

Dogman saw Logen’s face flinch when he heard that name. He backed away, one hand clamped to his side and his sword gripped bloody in the other. Then

he turned and limped off down the glittering hallway.

‘Hurts,’ said Grim, as Dogman squatted down next to him.

‘Where?’

He gave a bloody smile. ‘Everywhere.’

‘Right, well . . .’ Dogman pulled his shirt up. One side of his chest was caved in, a great blue-black bruise spread out all across it like a tar-stain. He could hardly believe a man could still be breathing with a wound like that. ‘Ah . . .’ he muttered, not having a clue where to start even.

‘I think . . . I’m done.’

‘What, this?’ Dogman tried to grin but didn’t have it in him. ‘No more’n a scratch.’

‘Scratch, eh?’ Grim tried to lift his head, winced and fell back, breathing shallow. He stared up, eyes wide open. ‘That’s a fucking beautiful ceiling.’

The Dogman swallowed. ‘Aye. I reckon.’

‘Should’ve died fighting Ninefingers, long time ago. The rest was all a gift. Grateful for it, though, Dogman. I’ve always loved . . . our talks.’

He closed his eyes, and he stopped breathing. He’d never said much, Harding Grim. Famous for it. Now he’d stay silent forever. A pointless sort of a death, a long way from home. Not for anything he’d believed in, or understood, or stood to gain from. Nothing more’n a waste. But then Dogman had seen a lot of men go back to the mud, and there was never anything fine about it. He took a long breath, and stared down at the floor.

A single lamp cast creeping shadows across the mouldering hallway, over rough stone and flaking plaster. It made sinister outlines of the mercenaries, turned Cosca’s face and Ardee’s into unfamiliar masks. The darkness seemed to gather inside the heavy stonework of the archway and around the door within – ancient-looking, knotted and grained, studded with black iron rivets.

‘Something amusing, Superior?’

‘I stood here,’ murmured Gloкта. ‘In this exact spot. With Silber.’ He reached out and brushed the iron handle with his fingertips. ‘My hand was on the latch . . . and I moved on.’ *Ah, the irony. The answers we seek so long and far for – so often at our fingertips all along.*

Gloкта felt a shiver down his twisted spine as he leaned close to the door. He could hear something from beyond, a muffled droning in a language he did not recognise. *The Adeptus Demoniac calls upon the denizens of the abyss?* He licked his lips, the image of High Justice Marovia’s frozen remains fresh in his mind. *It would be rash to plunge straight through, however keen we are to put our questions to rest. Very rash. . . .*

‘Superior Goyle, since you have led us here, perhaps you would care to go first?’

‘Geegh?’ squeaked Goyle through his gag, his already bulging eyes going even wider. Cosca took the Superior of Adua by his collar, seized the iron handle with his other hand, thrust it swiftly open and applied his boot to the seat of Goyle’s trousers. He stumbled through, bellowing meaningless nonsense into his gag. The metallic sound of a flatbow being discharged issued

from the other side of the door, along with the chanting, louder and harsher now by far.

What would Colonel Glokta have said? Onwards to victory, lads! Glokta lurched through the doorway, almost tripping over his own aching foot on the threshold, and gazed about him in surprise. A large, circular hall with a domed ceiling, its shadowy walls painted with a vast, exquisitely detailed mural. *And one that seems uncomfortably familiar.* Kanedias, the Master Maker, loomed up over the chamber with arms outspread, five times life-size or more, fire blazing from behind him in vivid crimson, orange, white. On the opposite wall lay his brother Juvens, stretched out on the grass beneath flowering trees, blood running from his many wounds. In between the two men, the Magi marched to take their revenge, six on one side, five on the other, bald Bayaz in the lead. *Blood, fire, death, vengeance. How wonderfully appropriate, given the circumstances.*

An intricate design had been laid out with obsessive care, covering wide floor. Circles within circles, shapes, symbols, figures of frightening complexity, all described in neat lines of white powder. Salt, unless I am much mistaken. Goyle lay on his chest a stride or two from the door, at the edge of the outermost ring, his hands still tied behind him. Dark blood spread out from under him, the point of a flatbow bolt sticking out of his back. *Just where his heart should be. I would never have taken that for his weak spot.*

Four of the University's Adepti stood in various stages of amazement. Three of them: Chayle, Denka, and Kandelau, held candles in both hands, their sputtering wicks giving off a choking corpse-stink. Saurizin, the Adeptus Chemical, clutched an empty flatbow. The faces of the old men, lit in bilious yellow from beneath, were pantomime masks of fear.

At the far side of the room Silber stood behind a lectern, a great book open before him, staring down with intense concentration by the light of a single lamp. His finger hissed across the page, his thin lips moving ceaselessly. Even at this distance, and despite the fact the room was icy cold, Glokta could see fat beads of sweat running down his thin face. Beside him, painfully upright in his pure white coat and glaring blue daggers across the width of the chamber, stood Arch Lector Sult.

'Glokta, you crippled bastard!' he snarled, 'what the hell are you doing here?'

'I could well ask you the same question, your Eminence.' He waved his cane at the scene. 'Except the candles, the ancient books, the chanting and the circles of salt rather give the game away, no?' *And a rather infantile game it seems, suddenly. All that time, while I was torturing my way through the Mercers, while I was risking my life in Dagoska, while I was blackmailing votes in your name, you were up to . . . this?*

But Sult seemed to be taking it seriously enough. 'Get out, you fool! This is our last chance!'

'This? Seriously?' Cosca was already through the door, masked mercenaries following. Silber's eyes were still fixed on the book, lips still moving, more sweat on his face than ever. Glokta frowned. 'Someone shut him up.'

'No!' shouted Chayle, a look of utter horror on his tiny face. 'You mustn't stop the incantations! It is a profoundly dangerous operation! The

consequences could be . . . could be—'

'Disastrous!' shrieked Kandelau. One of the mercenaries took a step towards the middle of the room nonetheless.

'Don't tread near the salt!' screeched Denka, wax dripping from his wobbling candle. 'Whatever you do!'

'Wait!' snapped Glokta, and the man paused at the edge of the circle, peering at him over his mask. The room was growing colder even as they spoke. Unnaturally cold. Something was happening in the centre of the circles. The air was trembling, like the air above a bonfire, more and more as Silber's harsh voice droned on. Glokta stood frozen, his eyes flicking between the old Adepti. *What to do? Stop him, or don't stop him? Stop him, or—*

'Allow me!' Cosca stepped forwards, delving into his black coat with his spare left hand. *But you can't be—* He whipped his arm out with a careless flourish and his throwing knife came with it. The blade flashed in the candlelight, spun directly through the shimmering air in the centre of the room, and imbedded itself to the hilt in Silber's forehead with a gentle thud.

'Ha!' Cosca seized Glokta by the shoulder. 'What did I tell you? Have you ever seen a knife thrown better?'

Blood ran down the side of Silber's face in a red trickle. His eyes rolled upwards, flickered, then he sagged sideways, dragging over his lectern, and crashed to the floor. His book tumbled down on top of him, aged pages flapping, the lamp spilled over and sprayed streaks of burning oil across the floor.

'No!' shrieked Sult.

Chayle gasped, his mouth falling open. Kandelau threw his candle aside and sank grovelling to the floor. Denka gave a terrified squeak, one hand over his face, staring out pop-eyed from between his fingers. There was a long pause while everyone except Cosca stared, horrified, towards the corpse of the Adeptus Demonic. Glokta waited, his few teeth bared, his eyes almost squeezed shut. *Like that horrible, beautiful moment between stubbing your toe and feeling the hurt. Here it comes. Here it comes.*

Here comes the pain . . .

But nothing came. No demonic laughter echoed through the chamber. The floor did not fall in to expose a gate to hell. The shimmering faded, the room began to grow warmer. Glokta raised his brows, almost disappointed. 'It would seem the diabolical arts are decidedly overrated.'

'No!' snarled Sult again.

'I am afraid so, your Eminence. And to think I used to respect you.' Glokta grinned at the Adeptus Chemical, still clinging weakly to his empty flatbow. He waved a hand at Goyle's body. 'A good shot. I congratulate you. One less mess for me to tidy up.' He waved a finger at the crowd of mercenaries behind him. 'Now seize that man.'

'No!' bellowed Saurizin, throwing his flatbow to the floor. 'None of it was my idea! I had no choice! It was him!' He stabbed a thick finger at Silber's lifeless body. 'And . . . and him!' He pointed to Sult with a trembling arm.

'You've got the right idea, but it can wait for the interrogation. Would you be kind enough to take his Eminence into custody?'

'Happily.' Cosca strolled across the floor of the wide room, his boots sending

up puffs of white powder, leaving a trail of ruination through the intricate patterns.

‘Glokta, you blundering idiot!’ shrieked Sult. ‘You have no idea of the danger Bayaz poses! This First of the Magi and his bastard king! Glokta! You have no right! Gah!’ He yelped as Cosca dragged his arms behind his back and forced him to his knees, his white hair in disarray. ‘You have no idea—’

‘If the Gurmish don’t kill the lot of us, you’ll get ample time to explain it to me. Of that I assure you.’ Glokta leered his toothless smile as Cosca drew the rope tight around Sult’s wrists. *If you only knew how long I have dreamed of saying these words.* ‘Arch Lector Sult. I arrest you for high treason against his Majesty the King.’

Jeal could only stand and stare. One of the twins, the one spattered in blood, lifted her long arms slowly over her head and gave a long, satisfied stretch. The other raised an eyebrow.

‘How would you like to die?’ she asked.

‘Your Majesty, get behind me.’ Gorst hefted his long steel in his one good hand.

‘No. Not this time.’ Jeal pulled the crown from his head, the crown that Bayaz had been so particular in designing, and tossed it clattering away. He was done with being a king. If he was to die, he would die a man, like any other. He had been given so many advantages, he realised now. Far more than most men could ever dream of. So many chances to do good, and he had done nothing besides whine and think of himself. Now it was too late. ‘I’ve lived my life leaning on others. Hiding behind them. Climbing on their shoulders. Not this time.’

One of the twins raised her hands and started slowly to clap, the regular tap, tap, echoing from the mirrors. The other giggled. Gorst raised his sword. Jeal did the same, one last act of pointless defiance.

Then High Justice Marovia flashed between them. The old man moved with impossible speed, his dark robe snapping around him. He had something in his hand. A long rod of dark metal with a hook on the end.

‘What—’ muttered Jeal.

The hook blazed suddenly, searingly white, bright as the sun on a summer’s day. A hundred hooks burned like stars, reflected back from the mirrors round the walls, and back, and back, into the far distance. Jeal gasped, squeezed his eyes shut, holding one hand over his face, the long trail left by that brilliant point burned fizzing into his vision.

He blinked, gaped, lowered his arm. The twins stood, the High Justice beside them, just where they had before, still as statues. Tendrils of white steam hissed up from vents in the end of the strange weapon and curled around Marovia’s arm. For a moment, nothing moved.

Then a dozen of the great mirrors at the far end of the hall fell in half across the middle, as though they were sheets of paper slashed suddenly by the world’s sharpest knife. A couple of the bottom halves and one of the top toppled slowly forwards into the room and shattered, scattering bright

fragments of glass across the tiled floor.

‘Urgggh,’ breathed the twin on the left. Jezal realised that blood was spurting out from under her armour. She lifted one hand towards him and it dropped off the end of her arm and thudded to the tiles, blood squirting from the smoothly severed stump. She toppled to the left. Or her body did, at least. Her legs fell the other way. The bigger part of her crashed to the ground, and her head came off and rolled across the tiles in a widening pool. Her hair, trimmed off cleanly at the neck, fluttered down into the bloody mess in a golden cloud.

Armour, flesh, bone, all divided into neat sections as perfectly as cheese by a cheese wire. The twin on the right frowned, took a wobbling step towards Marovia. Her knees gave out and she fell in half at the waist. The legs slumped down and lay still, dust sliding out in a brown heap. The top half dragged itself forward by the nails, lifted its head, hissing.

The air around the High Justice shimmered and the Eater’s severed body burst into flames. It thrashed, for a while, making a long squealing sound. Then it was still, a mass of smoking black ash.

Marovia lifted up the strange weapon, whistling softly as he smiled at the hook on the end, a last few traces of vapour still drifting from it. ‘Kanedias. He certainly knew how to make a weapon. The Master Maker indeed, eh, your Majesty?’

‘What?’ muttered Jezal, utterly dumbfounded.

Marovia’s face melted slowly away as he crossed the floor towards them. Another began to show itself beneath. Only his eyes remained the same. Different-coloured eyes, happy lines around the corners, grinning at Jezal like an old friend.

Yoru Sulfur bowed. ‘Never any peace, eh, your Majesty? Never the slightest peace.’

There was a crash as one of the doors burst open. Jezal raised his sword, heart in his mouth. Sulfur whipped round, the Maker’s weapon held down by his side. A man stumbled into the room. A big man, his grimacing face covered in scars, his chest heaving, a heavy sword hanging from one hand, the other clutched to his ribs.

Jezal blinked, hardly able to believe it. ‘Logen Ninefingers. How the hell did you get here?’

The Northman stared for a moment. Then he leaned back against a mirror by the door, let his sword drop to the tiles. He slid down, slowly, until he hit the floor, and sat there with his head leaning back against the glass. ‘Long story,’ he said.

‘Listen to us . . .’

The wind was full of shapes, now. Hundreds of them. They crowded in around the outermost circle, the bright iron turned misty, gleaming with cold wet.

‘. . . we have things to tell you, Ferro . . .’

‘Secrets . . .’

'What can we give you?'

'We know . . . everything.'

'You need only let us in . . .'

So many voices. She heard Aruf among them, her old teacher. She heard Susman the slaver. She heard her mother and her father. She heard Yulwei, and Prince Uthman. A hundred voices. A thousand. Voices she knew and had forgotten. Voices of the dead and of the living. Shouts, mutters, screams. Whispers, in her ear. Closer still. Closer than her own thoughts.

'You want vengeance?'

'We can give you vengeance.'

'Like nothing you have dreamed of.'

'All you want. All you need.'

'Only let us in . . .'

'That empty space in you?'

'We are what is missing!'

The metal rings had turned white with frost. Ferro kneeled at one end of a dizzying tunnel, its walls made from rushing, roaring, furious matter, full of shadows, its end far beyond the dark sky. The laughter of the First of the Magi echoed faintly in her ears. The air hummed with power, twisted, shimmered, blurred.

'You need do nothing.'

'Bayaz.'

'He will do it.'

'Fool!'

'Liar!'

'Let us in . . .'

'He cannot understand.'

'He uses you!'

'He laughs.'

'But not for long.'

'The gates strain.'

'Let us in . . .'

If Bayaz heard the voices he gave no sign. Cracks ran through the quivering paving, branching out from his feet, splinters floating up around him in whirling spirals. The iron rings began to shift, to buckle. With a grinding of tortured metal they twisted out from the crumbling stones, bright edges shining.

'The seals break.'

'Eleven wards.'

'And eleven wards reversed.'

'The doors open.'

'Yes,' came the voices, speaking together.

The shadows crowded in closer. Ferro's breath came short and fast, her teeth rattled, her limbs trembled, the cold was on her very heart. She knelt at a precipice, bottomless, limitless, full of shadows, full of voices.

'Soon we will be with you.'

'Very soon.'

'The time is upon us.'

'Both sides of the divide, joined.'

'As they were meant to be.'

'Before Euz spoke his First Law.'

'Let us in . . .'

She needed only to cling to the Seed a moment longer. Then the voices would give her vengeance. Bayaz was a liar, she had known it from the start. She owed him nothing. Her eyelids flickered, closed, her mouth hung open. The noise of the wind grew fainter yet, until she could hear only the voices.

Whispering, soothing, righteous.

'We will take the world and make it right.'

'Together.'

'Let us in . . .'

'You will help us.'

'You will free us.'

'You can trust us.'

'Trust us . . .'

Trust?

A word that only liars used. Ferro remembered the wreckage of Aulcus. The hollow ruins, the blasted mud. The creatures of the Other Side are made of lies. Better to have an empty space in her, than to fill it with this. She wedged her tongue between her teeth and bit down hard, felt her mouth fill up with salty blood. She sucked in breath, forced her eyes open.

'Trust us . . .'

'Let us in!'

She saw the Maker's box, a shifting, swimming outline. She bent down over it, digging at it with her numb fingertips while the air lashed at her. She would be no one's slave. Not for Bayaz, not for the Tellers of Secrets. She would find her own path. A dark one, perhaps, but her own.

The lid swung open.

'No.' The voices hissed together in her ear.

'No!'

Ferro ground her bloody teeth, growled with fury as she forced her fingers to unclench. The world was a melting, screaming, formless mass of darkness. Gradually, gradually, her dead hand came open. Here was her revenge. Against the liars, the users, the thieves. The earth shook, crumbled, tore, as thin and fragile as a sheet of glass, and with an empty void beneath it. She turned her trembling hand and the Seed dropped from her palm.

All as one, the voices screamed their harsh command. 'No!'

She blindly seized hold of the lid. 'Fuck yourselves!' she hissed.

And with her last grain of strength she forced the box closed.

After the Rains

Logen leaned on the parapet, high up on a tower at one side of the palace, and frowned into the wind. He'd done the same, it felt an age ago now, from the top of the Tower of Chains. He'd stared out dumbstruck at the endless city, wondering if he could ever have dreamed of a man-made thing so proud, and beautiful, and indestructible as the Agriont.

By the dead, how times change.

The green space of the park was scattered with fallen rubbish, trees broken, grass gouged, half the lake leaked away and sunken to a muddy bog. At its western edge a sweep of fine white buildings still stood, even if the windows gaped empty. Further west, and they had no roofs, bare rafters hanging. Further still their walls were torn and scoured, empty shells, choked with rubble.

Beyond that, there was nothing. The great hall with the golden dome, gone. The square where Logen had watched the sword-game, gone. The Tower of Chains, the mighty wall under it, and all the grand buildings over which Logen had fled with Ferro. All gone.

A colossal circle of destruction was carved from the western end of the Agriont, and only acres of formless wreckage remained. The city beyond was torn with black scars, smoke still rising from a few last fires, from smouldering hulks still drifting in the bay. The House of the Maker loomed over the scene, a sharp black mass under the brooding clouds, uncaring and untouched.

Logen stood there, scratching at the scarred side of his face, over and over. His wounds ached. So many of them. Every part of him was battered and bruised, slashed and torn. From the fight with the Eater, from the battle beyond the moat, from the duel with the Feared, from seven days of slaughter in the High Places. From a hundred fights, and skirmishes, and old campaigns. Too many to remember. So tired, and sore, and sick.

He frowned down at his hands on the parapet in front of him. The bare stone looked back where his middle finger used to be. He was Ninefingers still. The Bloody-Nine. A man made of death, just as Bethod had said. He'd nearly killed the Dogman yesterday, he knew it. His oldest friend. His only friend. He'd raised the sword, and if it wasn't for a trick of fate, he would have done it.

He remembered standing high up, on the side of the Great Northern library, looking out over the empty valley, the still lake like a great mirror beneath it. He remembered feeling the wind on his fresh-shaved jaw, and wondering whether a man could change.

Now he knew the answer.

'Master Ninefingers!'

Logen turned quickly, hissed through his teeth as the stitches down his side burned. The First of the Magi stepped through the doorway and out into the

open air. He was changed, somehow. He looked young. Younger even than when Logen first met him. There was a sharpness to his movements, a gleam in his eye. It even seemed that there were a few dark hairs in the grey beard round his friendly grin. The first smile Logen had seen in a good while.

'You are hurt?' he asked.

Logen sucked sourly at his teeth. 'Hardly the first time.'

'And yet it gets no easier.' Bayaz placed his meaty fists on the stone next to Logen's and stared out happily at the view. Just as if it was a field of flowers instead of a sweep of epic ruin. 'I hardly expected to see you again so soon. And to see you so very far advanced. I understand that your feud is over. You defeated Bethod. Threw him from his own walls, the way I heard it. A nice touch. Always thinking of the song they will sing, eh? And then you took his place. The Bloody-Nine, King of the Northmen! Imagine that.'

Logen frowned. 'That wasn't how it happened.'

'Details. The result is the same, is it not? Peace in the North, at last? Either way, I congratulate you.'

'Bethod had a few things to say.'

'Did he?' asked Bayaz, carelessly. 'I always found his conversation rather drab. All about himself, his plans, his achievements. It is so very tiresome when men think never of others. Poor manners.'

'He said you're the reason why he didn't kill me. That you bargained for my life.'

'True, I must confess. He owed me, and you were the price I demanded. I like to keep one eye on the future. Even then, I knew I might have need of a man who could speak to the spirits. It was an unexpected bonus that you turned out to be such a winning travelling companion.'

Logen found he was talking through gritted teeth. 'Would have been nice to know is all.'

'You never asked, Master Ninefingers. You did not want to know my plans, as I recall, and I did not want to make you feel indebted. "I saved your life once" would have been a poor start to our friendship.'

All reasonable enough, like everything Bayaz ever said, but it left a sour taste still, to have been traded like a hog. 'Where's Quai? I'd like to—'

'Dead.' Bayaz pronounced the word smartly, sharp as a knife thrust. 'We feel his loss most keenly.'

'Back to the mud, eh?' Logen remembered the effort he'd made to save that man's life. The miles he'd slogged through the rain, trying to do the right thing. All wasted. Perhaps he should've felt more. But it was hard with so much death spread out in front of him. Logen was numb, now. Either that, or he really didn't care a shit. It was hard to say which.

'Back to the mud,' he muttered again. 'You carry on, though, don't you.'

'Of course.'

'That's the task that comes with surviving. You remember them, you say some words, then you carry on, and hope for better.'

'Indeed.'

'You have to be realistic about these things.'

'True.'

Logen worked at his sore side with one hand, trying to make himself feel

something. But a scrap of extra pain helped no one. 'I lost a friend yesterday.'

'It was a bloody day. But a victorious one.'

'Oh aye? For who?' He could see people moving among the ruins, insects picking at the rubble, searching for survivors and finding the dead. He doubted many of them were feeling the flush of victory right now. He knew he wasn't. 'I should be with my own kind,' he muttered, but without moving. 'Helping with the burying. Helping with the wounded.'

'And yet you are here, looking down.' Bayaz' green eyes were hard as stones. That hardness that Logen had noticed from the very start, and had somehow forgotten. Somehow grown to overlook. 'I entirely understand your feelings. Healing is for the young. As one gets older, one finds one has less and less patience with the wounded.' He raised his eyebrows as he turned back towards the horrible view. 'I am very old.'

He lifted his fist to knock, then paused, fingers rubbing nervously against his palm.

He remembered the sour-sweet smell of her, the strength of her hands, the shape of her frown in the firelight. He remembered the warmth of her, pressed up close to him in the night. He knew there had been something good between them, even if all the words they had said had been hard. Some people don't have soft words in them, however much they try. He didn't hold much hope, of course. A man like him was better off without it. But you get nothing out if you put nothing in.

So Logen gritted his teeth and knocked. No reply. He chewed at his lip, and knocked again. Nothing. He frowned, twitchy and suddenly out of patience, wrenched the knob round and shoved the door open.

Ferro spun about. Her clothes were rumpled and dirty, even more than usual. Her eyes were wide, wild even, her fists clenched. But her face quickly fell when she saw it was him, and his heart sank with it.

'It's me, Logen.'

'Uh,' she grunted. She jerked her head sideways, frowning at the window. She took a couple of steps towards it, eyes narrowed. Then she snapped round suddenly the other way. 'There!'

'What?' muttered Logen, baffled.

'Do you not hear them?'

'Hear what?'

'Them, idiot!' She crept over to one wall and pressed herself up against it.

Logen hadn't been sure how it would go. You could never be sure of anything with her, he knew that. But he hadn't been expecting this. Just plough ahead, he reckoned. What else could he do?

'I'm a king, now.' He snorted. 'King of the Northmen, would you believe it?' He was thinking she'd laugh in his face, but she just stood, listening to the wall. 'Me and Luthar, both. A pair of kings. Can you think of two more worthless bastards to put crowns on, eh?' No answer.

Logen licked his lips. No choice but to get straight to it, maybe. 'Ferro. The way things turned out. The way we . . . left it.' He took a step towards her,

and another. 'I wish I hadn't . . . I don't know . . .' He put one hand on her shoulder. 'Ferro, I'm trying to tell you—'

She turned, quickly, plastered her hand over his mouth. 'Shhhhh.' She grabbed his shirt and pulled him down, down onto his knees. She pressed her ear against the tiles, eyes moving back and forward as if she was listening for something. 'Do you hear that?' She let go of him and pushed herself into the corner. 'There! Do you hear them?'

He reached out, slowly, and touched the back of her neck, ran his rough fingertips over her skin. She shook him off with a jerk of her shoulders, and he felt his face twist. Perhaps that good thing between them had been only in his mind, and never in hers. Perhaps he had wanted it so badly that he had let himself imagine it.

He stood up, cleared his dry throat. 'Never mind. I'll come back later, maybe.' She was still on her knees, her head against the floor. She did not even watch him leave.



Logen Ninefingers was no stranger to death. He'd walked among it all his days. He'd watched the bodies burned by the score after the battle at Carleon, long ago. He'd seen them buried by the hundred up in the nameless valley in the High Places. He'd walked on a hill of men's bones under ruined Aulcus.

But even the Bloody-Nine, even the most feared man in the North, had never looked on anything like this.

Bodies were stacked beside the wide avenue in heaps, chest-high. Sagging mounds of corpses, on and on. Hundreds upon hundreds. Too many for him to guess at the numbers. Someone had made an effort at covering them, but not that great an effort. The dead give no thanks for it, after all. Ragged sheets flapped in the breeze, weighted down with broken wood, limp hands and feet hanging out from underneath.

At this end of the road a few statues still stood. Once-proud kings and their advisers, stone faces and bodies scarred and pitted, stared sadly down at the bloody waste heaped round their feet. Enough of them for Logen to recognise that this truly was the Kingsway, and that he hadn't somehow stumbled into the land of the dead.

A hundred strides further and there were only empty plinths, one with broken legs still attached. A strange group were clustered around them. Withered-looking. Somewhere between dead and alive. A man sat on a block of stone, staring numbly as he pulled handfuls of hair out of his head. Another was coughing into a bloody rag. A woman and a man lay side by side, gawping at nothing, faces shrivelled to little more than skulls. Her breath came crackling short and fast. His did not come at all.

Another hundred strides and it was as if Logen walked through some ruined hell. There was no sign that statues, buildings, or anything else had ever stood there. In their place were only tangled hills of strange rubbish. Broken stone, splintered wood, twisted metal, paper, glass, all crushed together and bound

up with tons of dust and mud. Things stuck from the wreckage, strangely intact – a door, a chair, a carpet, a painted plate, the smiling face of a statue.

Men and women struggled everywhere among this chaos, streaked with dirt, picking at the rubbish, throwing it down to the road, trying to clear paths through it. Rescuers, workmen, thieves, who knew? Logen passed by a crackling bonfire high as a man, felt the kiss of its heat on his cheek. A big soldier in armour stained with black soot stood beside it. ‘You find anything in white metal?’ he was roaring at the searchers, ‘anything at all? It goes in the fire! Flesh in white metal? Burn it! Orders of the Closed Council!’

A few strides further on, someone was on top of one of the highest mounds, straining at a great length of wood. He turned round to get a better grip. None other than Jezal dan Luthar. His clothes were torn and grubby, his face was smudged with mud. He barely looked any more like a king than Logen did.

A thickset man stood staring up, one arm in a sling. ‘Your Majesty, this is not safe!’ he piped in an oddly girlish voice. ‘We really should be—’

‘No! This is where I’m needed!’ Jezal bent back over the beam, straining at it, veins bulging from his neck. There was no way he was going to get it shifted on his own, but still he tried. Logen stood watching him. ‘How long’s he been like this?’

‘All night, and all day,’ said the thickset man, ‘and no sign of stopping. Those few we’ve found alive, nearly all of them have this sickness.’ He waved his good arm towards the pitiful group beside the statues. ‘Their hair falls out. Their nails. Their teeth. They wither. Some have died already. Others are well on the way.’ He slowly shook his head. ‘What crime did we commit to deserve this punishment?’

‘Punishment doesn’t always come to the guilty.’

‘Ninefingers!’ Jezal was looking down, the watery sun behind him. ‘There’s a strong back! Grab the end of that beam there!’

It was hard to see what good shifting a beam might do, in all of this. But great journeys start with small steps, Logen’s father had always told him. So he clambered up, wood cracking and stones sliding underneath his boots, hauled himself to the top and stood there, staring.

‘By the dead.’ From where he was standing, the hills of wreckage seemed to go on forever. People crawled over them, dragging frantically at the rubble, sorting carefully through it, or simply standing like him, stunned by the scale of it. A circle of utter waste, a mile across or more.

‘Help me, Logen!’

‘Aye. Right.’ He bent down and dug his hands under one end of the great length of scarred wood. Two kings, dragging at a beam. The kings of mud.

‘Pull, then!’ Logen heaved, his stitches burning. Gradually he felt the wood shift. ‘Yes!’ grunted Jezal through gritted teeth. Together they lifted it, hauled it to one side. Jezal reached down and dragged away a dry tree-branch, tore back a ripped sheet. A woman lay beneath, staring sideways. One broken arm was wrapped around a child, curly hair dark with blood.

‘Alright.’ Jezal wiped slowly at his mouth with the back of one dirty hand. ‘Alright. Well. We’ll put them with the rest of the dead.’ He clambered further over the wreckage. ‘You! Bring that crowbar up here! Up here, and a pick, we need to clear this stone! Stack it there. We’ll need it, later. To rebuild!’

Logen put a hand on his shoulder. 'Jezal, wait. Wait. You know me.'

'Of course. I like to think so.'

'Alright. Tell me something, then. Am I . . .' He struggled to find the right words. 'Am I . . . an evil man?'

'You?' Jezal stared at him, confused. 'You're the best man I know.'

They were gathered under a broken tree in the park, a shadowy crowd of them. Black outlines of men, standing calm and still, red clouds and golden spread out above, around the setting sun. Logen could hear their slow voices as he walked up. Words for the dead, soft and sad. He could see the graves at their feet. Two dozen piles of fresh turned earth, set out in a circle so each man was equal. The Great Leveller, just as the hillmen say. Men put in the mud, and men saying words. Could've been a scene out of the old North, long ago in the time of Skarling Hoodless.

' . . . Harding Grim. I never saw a better man with a bow. Not ever. Can't count the number o' times he saved my life, and never expected thanks for it. Except maybe that I'd do the same for him. Guess I couldn't, this time. Guess none of us could . . .'

The Dogman's voice trailed off. A few heads turned to look at Logen as his footsteps crunched in the gravel. 'If it ain't the King o' the Northmen,' someone said.

'The Bloody-Nine his self.'

'We should bow, shouldn't we?'

They were all looking at him now. He could see their eyes gleaming in the dusk. Nothing more than shaggy outlines, hard to tell one man from another. A crowd of shadows. A crowd of ghosts, and just as unfriendly.

'You got something you want to say, Bloody-Nine?' came a voice from near the back.

'I don't reckon,' he said. 'You're doing alright.'

'Was no reason for us to be here.' A few mumbles of agreement.

'Not our bloody fight.'

'No need for them to have died.' More mutters.

'Should be you we're burying.'

'Aye, maybe.' Logen would have liked to weep at that. But instead he felt himself smiling. The Bloody-Nine's smile. That grin that skulls have, with nothing inside but death. 'Maybe. But you don't get to pick who dies. Not unless you've got the bones to put your own hand to it. Have you? Have any of you?' Silence. 'Well, then. Good for Harding Grim. Good for the rest o' the dead, they'll all be missed.' Logen spat onto the grass. 'Shit on the rest of you.' And he turned and walked back the way he came.

Into the darkness.

Answers

So much to do. The House of Questions still stood, and someone had to take the reins. *Who else will do it? Superior Goyle? A flatbow bolt through the heart prevents him, alas.* Someone had to look to the internment and questioning of the many hundreds of Gurkish prisoners, more captured every day as the army drove the invaders back to Keln. *And who else will do it? Practical Vitari? Left the Union forever with her children in tow.* Someone had to examine the treason of Lord Brock. To dig him up, and root out his accomplices. To make arrests, and obtain confessions. *And who else is there, now? Arch Lector Sult? Oh, dear me, no.*

Glokta wheezed up to his door, his few teeth bared at the endless pains in his legs. *A fortunate decision, at least, to move to the eastern side of the Agriont. One should be grateful for the small things in life, like a place to rest one's crippled husk. My old lodgings are no doubt languishing under a thousand tons of rubble, just like the rest of—*

His door was not quite shut. He gave it the gentlest of pushes and it creaked open, soft lamplight spilling out into the corridor, a glowing stripe over the dusty floorboards, over the foot of Glokta's cane and the muddy toe of one boot. *I left no door unlocked, and certainly no lamps burning.* His tongue slithered nervously over his empty gums. *A visitor, then. An uninvited one. Do I go in, and welcome them to my rooms? His eyes slid sideways into the shadows of the corridor. Or do I make a run for it?* He was almost smiling as he shuffled over the threshold, cane first, then the right foot, then the left, dragging painfully behind him.

Glokta's guest sat by the window in the light of a single lamp, brightness splashed across the hard planes of his face, cold darkness gathered in the deep hollows. The squares board was set before him, just as Glokta left it, the pieces casting long shadows across the chequered wood.

'Why, Superior Glokta. I have been waiting for you.'

And I for you. Glokta limped over to the table, his cane scraping against the bare boards. *As reluctantly as a man limping to the gallows. Ah, well. No one tricks the hangman forever. Perhaps we'll have some answers, at least, before the end. I always dreamed of dying well-informed.* Slowly, ever so slowly, he lowered himself grunting into the free chair.

'Do I have the pleasure of addressing Master Valint, or Master Balk?'

Bayaz smiled. 'Both, of course.'

Glokta wrapped his tongue round one of his few remaining teeth and dragged it away with a faint sucking sound. 'And to what do I owe the overpowering honour?'

'I said, did I not, that day we visited the Maker's House, that we should have a talk at some point? A talk about what I want, and about what you want? That point has come.'

'Oh joyous day.'

The First of the Magi watched him, the same look in his bright eyes that a man might have while watching an interesting beetle. 'I must admit that you fascinate me, Superior. Your life would seem to be entirely unbearable. And yet you fight so very, very hard to stay alive. With every weapon and stratagem. You simply refuse to die.'

'I am ready to die.' Glokta returned his gaze, like for like. 'But I refuse to lose.'

'Whatever the cost, eh? We are two of a kind, you and I, and we are a rare kind indeed. We understand what must be done, and we do not flinch from doing it, regardless of sentiment. You remember Lord Chancellor Feekt, of course.'

If I cast my mind a long way back . . . 'The Golden Chancellor? They say he ran the Closed Council for forty years. They say he ran the Union.' Sult said so. Sult said his death left a hole, into which he and Marovia were both keen to step. That is where this ugly dance began, for me. With a visit from the Arch Lector, with the confession of my old friend Salem Rews, with the arrest of Sepp dan Teufel, Master of the Mints . . .

Bayaz let one thick fingertip trail across the pieces on the squares board, as though considering his next move. 'We had an agreement, Feekt and I. I made him powerful. He served me, utterly.'

Feekt . . . the foundation on which the nation rested . . . served you? I expected delusions of grandeur, but this will take some beating. 'You would have me suppose that you controlled the Union all that time?'

Bayaz snorted. 'Ever since I forced the damn thing together in the time of Harod the Great, so-called. It has sometimes been necessary for me to take a hand myself, as in this most recent crisis. But mostly I have stood at a distance, behind the curtain, as it were.'

'A little stuffy back there, one imagines.'

'An uncomfortable necessity.' The lamplight gleamed on the Magus' white grin. 'People like to watch the pretty puppets, Superior. Even a glimpse of the puppeteer can be most upsetting for them. Why, they might even suddenly notice the strings around their own wrists. Sult caught a glimpse of something, behind the curtain, and only look at the trouble he caused for everyone.' Bayaz flicked one of the pieces over and it clattered onto its side, rocked gently back and forth.

'Let us suppose you are indeed the great architect, and you have given us . . .' Glokta waved his hand towards the window. *Acre of charming devastation.* 'All this. Why such generosity?'

'Not entirely selfless, I must confess. Khalul had the Gurmish to fight for him. I needed soldiers of my own. Even the greatest of generals needs little men to hold the line.' He absently nudged one of the smallest pieces forward. 'Even the greatest of warriors needs his armour.'

Glokta stuck out his bottom lip. 'But then Feekt died, and you were left naked.'

'Naked as a babe, at my age.' Bayaz gave a long sigh. 'And in poor weather too, with Khalul making ready for war. I should have arranged a suitable successor more quickly, but my thoughts were elsewhere, deep in my books.'

The older you get, the more swiftly the years pass. It's easy to forget how quickly people die.'

And how easily. 'The death of the Golden Chancellor left a vacuum,' muttered Glokta, thinking it through. 'Sult and Marovia saw a chance to take power for themselves, and advance their own notions of what the nation should be.'

'Exceptionally cock-eyed notions, as it happens. Sult wanted to return to an imaginary past where everyone kept their place and always did as they were told, and Marovia? Hah! Marovia wanted to piss power away to the people. Votes? Elections? The voice of the common man?'

'He aired some such notion.'

'I hope you aired the suitable level of contempt. Power for the people?' sneered Bayaz. 'They don't want it. They don't understand it. What the hell would they do with it if they had it? The people are like children. They *are* children. They need someone to tell them what to do.'

'Someone like you, I suppose?'

'Who better suited? Marovia thought to use me in his petty schemes, and all the while I made good use of him. While he tussled with Sult over scraps the game was already won. A move I had prepared some time before.'

Glokta slowly nodded. 'Jezal dan Luthar.' *Our little bastard.*

'Your friend and mine.'

But a bastard is no use unless . . . 'Crown Prince Raynault stood in the way.'

The Magus flicked a piece over and it rolled slowly from the board and rattled to the table. 'We talk of great events. There is sure to be some wastage.'

'You made it seem that he was killed by an Eater.'

'Oh, he was.' Bayaz watched smugly from the shadows. 'Not all who break the Second Law serve Khalul. My apprentice, Yoru Sulfur, has long been partial to a bite or two.' And he snapped his two rows of smooth and even teeth together.

'I see.'

'This is war, Superior. In war one must make use of every weapon. Restraint is folly. Worse. Restraint is cowardice. But only look who I am lecturing. You need no lessons in ruthlessness.'

'No.' *They cut them into me in the Emperor's prisons, and I have been practising them ever since.*

Bayaz nudged one of the pieces gently forward. 'A useful man, Sulfur. A man who long ago accepted the demands of necessity, and mastered the discipline of taking forms.' *He was the guard, weeping outside Prince Raynault's door. The guard who vanished into thin air the next day . . .*

'A shred of cloth taken from the Emissary's bed-chamber,' murmured Glokta. 'Blood daubed on his robe.' *And so an innocent man went to the gallows, and the war between Gurkhul and the Union blossomed. Two obstacles swept neatly away with one sharp flick of the broom.*

'Peace with the Gurkish did not suit my purposes. It was sloppy of Sulfur to leave such blatant clues. But then he never expected you to care about the truth when there was a convenient explanation to hand.'

Glokta nodded, slowly, as the shape of things unfolded in his mind. 'He heard of my investigations from Severard, and I received a charming visit

from your walking corpse, Mauthis, telling me to halt or die.'

'Exactly so. On other occasions Yoru took another face, and called himself the Tanner, and incited a few peasants to some rather unbecoming behaviour.' Bayaz examined his fingernails. 'All in a good cause, though, Superior.'

'To lend glamour to your latest puppet. To make him a favourite with the people. To make him familiar to the nobles, to the Closed Council. You were the source of the rumours.'

'Heroic acts in the ruined west? Jezal dan Luthar?' Bayaz snorted. 'He did little more than whine about the rain.'

'Amazing the rubbish idiots will believe if you shout it loudly enough. And you rigged the Contest too.'

'You noticed that?' Bayaz' smile grew wider. 'I am impressed, Superior, I am most impressed. You have fumbled so very close to the truth this whole time.' *And yet so very far away.* 'I wouldn't feel badly about it. I have many advantages. Sult groped towards the answers, in the end, but far too late. I suspected from the first what his plans might be.'

'Which is why you asked me to investigate?'

'The fact that you did not oblige me until the very last moment was the source of some annoyance.'

'Asking nicely might have helped.' *It would have been refreshing, at least.* 'I regret that I found myself in a difficult position. A case of too many masters.'

'No longer, though, eh? I was almost disappointed when I found out how limited Sult's studies were. Salt, and candles, and incantations? How pathetically adolescent. Enough to put a timely end to that would-be democrat Marovia, perhaps, but nothing to pose the slightest threat to me.'

Glokta frowned down at the squares board. *Sult and Marovia. For all their cleverness, for all their power, their ugly little struggle was an irrelevance. They were small pieces in this game. So small they never even guessed how vast the board truly was. Which makes me what? A speck of dust between the squares, at best.*

'What of the mysterious visitor to your chambers the day I first met you?' *A visitor to my chambers too, perhaps? A woman, and cold. . .*

Angry lines cut across Bayaz' forehead. 'A mistake made in my youth. You will speak no more of it.'

'Oh, as you command. And the Great Prophet Khalul?'

'The war will continue. On different battlefields, with different soldiers. But this will be the last battle fought with the weapons of the past. The magic leaks from the world. The lessons of the Old Time fade into the darkness of history. A new age dawns.'

The Magus made a careless movement with one hand and something flickered into the air, clattered to the centre of the board and spun round and round until it lay flat, with the unmistakable sound of falling money. A golden fifty-mark piece, glinting warm and welcoming in the lamplight. Glokta almost laughed. *Ah, even now, even here, it always comes down to this. Everything has a price.*

'It was money that bought victory in King Guslav's half-baked Gurkish war,' said Bayaz. 'It was money that united the Open Council behind their bastard king. It was money that brought Duke Orso rushing to the defence of his daughter and tipped the balance in our favour. All my money.'

'It was money that enabled me to hold Dagoska as long as I did.'

'And you know whose.' *Who would have thought? More first of the moneylenders than First of the Magi. Open Council and Closed, commoners and kings, merchants and torturers, all caught up in a golden web. A web of debts, and lies, and secrets, each strand plucked in its proper place, played like a harp by a master. And what of poor Superior Glokta, fumbling buffoon? Is there a place for his sour note in this sweet music? Or is the loan of my life about to be called in?*

'I suppose I should congratulate you on a hand well played,' muttered Glokta bitterly.

'Bah.' Bayaz dismissed it with a wave. 'Forcing a clutch of primitives together under that cretin Harod and making them act like civilised men. Keeping the Union in one piece through the civil war and bringing that fool Arnault to the throne. Guiding that coward Casamir to the conquest of Angland. Those were hands well played. This was nothing. I hold all the cards and always will do. I have—'

I tire of this. 'And blah, blah, fucking blah. The stench of self-satisfaction is becoming quite suffocating. If you mean to kill me, blast me to a cinder now and let's be done, but, for pity's sake, subject me to no more of your boasting.'

They sat still for a long moment, gazing at each other in silence across the darkened table. Long enough for Glokta's leg to start trembling, for his eye to start blinking, for his toothless mouth to turn dry as the desert. *Sweet anticipation. Will it be now? Will it be now? Will it be—* 'Kill you?' asked Bayaz mildly. 'And rob myself of your winning sense of humour?'

Not now. 'Then . . . why reveal your game to me?'

'Because I will soon be leaving Adua.' The Magus leaned forwards, his hard face sliding into the light. 'Because it is necessary that you understand where the power lies, and always will lie. It is necessary that you, unlike Sult, unlike Marovia, have a proper perspective. It is necessary . . . if you are to serve me.'

'To serve you?' I would sooner spend two years in the stinking darkness. I would sooner have my leg chopped to mincemeat. I would sooner have my teeth pulled from my head. But since I have done all those things already . . .

'You will take the task that Feekt once had. The task that a score of great men bore before him. You will be my representative, here in the Union. You will manage the Closed Council, the Open Council, and our mutual friend the king. You will ensure him heirs. You will maintain stability. In short, you will watch the board, while I am gone.'

'But the rest of the Closed Council will never—'

'Those that survive have been spoken to. They all will bow to your authority. Under mine, of course.'

'How will I—'

'I will be in touch. Frequently. Through my people at the bank. Through my apprentice, Sulfur. Through other means. You will know them.'

'I don't suppose I have any choice in the matter?'

'Not unless you can repay the million marks I leant you. Plus interest.'

Glokta patted at the front of his shirt. 'Damn it. I left my purse at work.'

'Then I fear you have no choice. But why would you refuse me? I offer you the chance to help me forge a new age.' *To bury my hands to the elbow in your dirty work. 'To be a great man. The very greatest of men.' To bestride the Closed*

Council like a crippled colossus. 'To leave your likeness set in stone on the Kingsway.' Where its hideousness can make the children cry. Once they clear away the rubble and the corpses, of course. 'To shape the course of a nation.'

'Under your direction.'

'Naturally. Nothing is free, you know that.' Again the Magus flicked his hand and something clattered spinning across the squares board. It came to rest in front of Glokta, gold glinting. The Arch Lector's ring. *So many times I bent to kiss this very jewel. Who could have dreamed that I might one day wear it?* He picked it up, turned it thoughtfully round and round. *And so I finally shake off a dark master, only to find my leash in the fist of another, darker and more powerful by far. But what choice do I have? What choices do any of us truly have?* He slid the ring onto his finger. The great stone shone in the lamplight, full of purple sparks. *From a dead man to the greatest in the realm, and all in one evening.*

'It fits,' murmured Glokta.

'Of course, your Eminence. I always knew it would.'

The Wounded

West woke with a start and tried to jerk up to sitting. Pain shot up one leg, across his chest, through his right arm, and stayed there, throbbing. He dropped back with a groan and stared at the ceiling. A vaulted stone ceiling, covered in thick shadows.

Sounds crept at him now from all around. Grunts and whimpers, coughs and sobs, quick gasping, slow growling. The occasional outright shriek of pain. Sounds between men and animals. A voice whispered throatily from somewhere to his left, droning endlessly away like a rat scratching at the walls. 'I can't see. Bloody wind. I can't see. Where am I? Somebody. I can't see.'

West swallowed, feeling the pain growing worse. In the hospitals in Gurkhul there had been sounds like that, when he had come to visit wounded soldiers from his company. He remembered the stink and noise of those horrible tents, the misery of the men in them, and above all the overpowering desire to leave and be among the healthy. But it was already awfully clear that leaving would not be so easy this time.

He was one of the wounded. A different, contemptible and disgusting species. Horror crept slowly through his body and mingled with the pain. How badly was he injured? Did he have all his limbs, still? He tried to move his fingers, wriggle his toes, clenched his teeth as the aching in his arm and leg grew worse. He brought his left hand trembling up before his face, turned it over in the dimness. It seemed intact, at least, but it was the only limb that he could move, and even that was a crushing effort. Panic slithered up his throat and clutched at him.

'Where am I? Bloody wind. I can't see. Help. Help. Where am I?'

'Fucking shut up!' West shouted, but the words died in his dry throat. All that came up was a hollow cough that set his ribs on fire again.

'Shhhh.' A soft touch on his chest. 'Just be still.'

A blurry face swam into view. A woman's face, he thought, with fair hair, but it was hard to focus. He closed his eyes and stopped trying. It hardly seemed to matter that much. He felt something against his lips, the neck of a bottle. He drank too thirstily, spluttered and felt cold water running down his neck.

'What happened?' he croaked.

'You were wounded.'

'I know that. I mean . . . in the city. The wind.'

'I don't know. I don't think anyone knows.'

'Did we win?'

'I suppose that . . . the Gurkish were driven out, yes. But there are a lot of wounded. A lot of dead.'

Another swallow of water. This time he managed it without gagging. 'Who

are you?’

‘My name is Ariss. Dan Kaspa.’

‘Ariss . . .’ West fumbled with the name. ‘I knew your cousin. Knew him well . . . a good man. He always used to talk about . . . how beautiful you were. And rich,’ he muttered, vaguely aware he should not be saying this, but unable to stop his mouth from working. ‘Very rich. He died. In the mountains.’

‘I know.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Trying to help with the wounded. It would be best for you to sleep now, if you—’

‘Am I whole?’

A pause. ‘Yes. Sleep now, if you can.’

Her dark face grew blurry, and West let his eyes close. The noises of agony slowly faded around him. He was whole. All would be well.

Someone was sitting next to his bed. Ardee. His sister. He blinked, worked his sour mouth, unsure where he was for a moment.

‘Am I dreaming?’ She reached forward and dug her nails into his arm. ‘Ah!’

‘Painful dream, eh?’

‘No,’ he was forced to admit. ‘This is real.’

She looked well. Far better than the last time he had seen her, that was sure. No blood on her face for one thing. No look of naked hatred, for another. Only a thoughtful frown. He tried to bring himself up to sitting, failed, and slumped back down. She did not offer to help. He had not really expected her to. ‘How bad is it?’ he asked.

‘Nothing too serious, apparently. A broken arm, a few broken ribs, and a leg badly bruised, they tell me. Some cuts on your face that may leave a scar or two, but then I got all the looks in the family anyway.’

He gave a snort of laughter and winced at the pain across his chest. ‘True enough. The brains too.’

‘Don’t feel badly about it. I’ve used them to make the towering success of my life that you see before you. The kind of achievement that you, as a Lord Marshal of the Union, can only dream of.’

‘Don’t,’ he hissed, clamping his good hand across his ribs. ‘It hurts.’

‘No less than you deserve.’

His laughter quickly stuttered out, and they were silent for a moment, looking at each other. Even that much was difficult. ‘Ardee . . .’ His voice caught in his sore neck. ‘Can you . . . forgive me?’

‘I already did. The first time I heard you were dead.’ She was trying to smile, he could tell. But she still had that twist of anger to her mouth. Probably she would have liked to dig her nails into his face rather than his arm. He was almost glad then, for a moment, that he was wounded. She had no choice but to be soft with him. ‘It’s good that you’re not. Dead, that is . . .’ She frowned over her shoulder. There was some manner of commotion at one end of the long cellar. Raised voices, the clatter of armoured footsteps.

‘The king!’ Whoever it was nearly squealed it in their excitement. ‘The king

is come again!’

In the beds all around men turned their heads, propped themselves up. A nervous excitement spread from cot to cot. ‘The king?’ they whispered, faces anxious and expectant, as though they were privileged to witness a divine visitation.

Several figures moved through the shadows at the far end of the hall. West strained to look, but could see little more than metal gleaming in the darkness. The foremost shape stopped beside a wounded man a few beds down.

‘They are treating you well?’ A voice strangely familiar, strangely different.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Is there anything you need?’

‘A kiss from a good woman?’

‘I would love to oblige you, but I fear I’m only a king. We’re a great deal more common than good women.’ Men laughed, even though it was not funny. West supposed that people laughing at your poor jokes was one advantage of being a monarch. ‘Anything else?’

‘Maybe . . . maybe another blanket, sir. Getting cold down here, at night.’

‘Of course.’ The figure jerked his thumb at a man behind. Lord Hoff, West realised now, dragging along at a respectful distance. ‘Another blanket for every man here.’

The Lord Chamberlain, that fearsome scourge of the audience chamber, humbly nodded his head like a meek child. The king stood, and moved into the light.

Jezal dan Luthar, of course, and yet it was hard to believe that it was the same man, and not only because of the rich fur mantle and the golden circlet on his forehead. He seemed taller. Handsome, still, but no longer boyish. A deep scar on his bearded jaw had given him an air of strength. The sneer of arrogance had become a frown of command. The carefree swagger had become a purposeful stride. He worked his way on slowly down the aisle between the cots, speaking to each man, pressing their hands, giving them thanks, promising them help. No one was overlooked.

‘A cheer for the king!’ someone gurgled through gritted teeth.

‘No! No. The cheering should be for you, my brave friends! You who have made sacrifices in my name. I owe you everything. It was only with your help that the Gurkish were defeated. Only with your help that the Union was saved. I do not forget a debt, that I promise you!’

West stared. Whoever this strange apparition was who looked so like Jezal dan Luthar, he spoke like a monarch. West almost felt a preposterous desire to drag himself from his bed and kneel. One casualty was trying to do just that as the king passed his bed. Jezal restrained him with a gentle hand on his chest, smiled and patted his shoulder as though he had been offering succour to the wounded his entire life, instead of getting drunk in shit-holes with the rest of the officers, and whining about such meagre tasks as he was given.

He drew close and saw West, lying there. His face lit up, though there was a tooth missing from his smile. ‘Collem West!’ he said, hastening over. ‘I can honestly say that I have never in my life been so pleased to see your face.’

‘Er . . .’ West moved his mouth around a bit, but hardly knew what to say.

Jezal turned to his sister. ‘Ardee . . . I hope you are well.’

‘Yes.’ She said nothing else. They stared at each other, for a long and intensely awkward moment, not speaking.

Lord Hoff frowned at the king, then at West, then at Ardee. He insinuated himself somewhat between the two of them. ‘Your Majesty, we should—’

Jeza! silenced him effortlessly with one raised hand. ‘I trust that you will soon join me in the Closed Council, West. I am in some need of a friendly face there, in truth. Not to mention good advice. You always were a mine of good advice. I never did thank you for it. Well, I can thank you now.’

‘Jeza! . . . I mean, your Majesty—’

‘No, no. Always Jeza! to you, I hope. You will have a room in the palace, of course. You will have the royal surgeon. Everything possible. See to that, please, Hoff.’

The Lord Chamberlain bowed. ‘Of course. Everything will be arranged.’

‘Good. Good. I am glad you are well, West. I cannot afford to lose you.’ The king nodded, to him, and to his sister. Then he turned and moved on, pressing hands, speaking soft words. A pool of hope seemed to surround him as he passed. Despair crowded in behind it. Smiles faded as he moved away. Men dropped back onto their beads, faces clouding over with pain.

‘Responsibility seems to have improved him,’ muttered West. ‘Almost beyond recognition.’

‘How long will it last, do you think?’

‘I’d like to think that it could stick, but then I’ve always been an optimist.’

‘That’s good.’ Ardee watched the magnificent new king of the Union striding away, wounded men straining from their cots for the slightest touch of his cloak. ‘That one of us can be.’

‘Marshal West!’

‘Jalenhorm. Good to see you.’ West pulled back the blankets with his good hand, eased his legs over the edge of the bed and winced his way up to sitting. The big man reached out and gave his hand a squeeze, clapped him on the shoulder.

‘You’re looking well!’

West smiled weakly. ‘Better ever day, Major. How’s my army?’

‘Fumbling on without you. Kroy’s holding things together. Not such a bad sort, the General, once you get used to him.’

‘If you say so. How many did we lose?’

‘Still hard to say. Things are somewhat chaotic. Whole companies missing. Impromptu units still chasing Gurmish stragglers across half the countryside. I don’t think we’ll have numbers for a while. I don’t know if we’ll ever get them. No one did well, but the ninth regiment were the ones fighting at the western end of the Agriont. They took the worst of . . .’ He fumbled for the words. ‘It.’

West grimaced. He remembered that black column of whirling matter reaching from the tortured earth to the circling clouds. The debris lashing at his skin, the screaming of the wind all around him. ‘What was . . . it?’

‘I’m damned if I know.’ Jalenhorm shook his head. ‘Damned if anyone does.’

But the rumour is that this Bayaz was involved, somehow. Half the Agriont's in ruins, and they've barely started shifting the rubble. You never saw anything like it, that I promise you. A lot of people dead in all that. Bodies stacked up in the open . . .' Jalenhorm took a long breath. 'And there are more dying every day. A lot of people getting ill.' He shuddered. 'This . . . sickness.'

'Disease. Always a part of war.'

'Not like this. Hundreds of cases, now. Some die in a day, almost before your eyes. Some take longer. They wither to skin and bone. They have whole halls full of them. Stinking, hopeless places. But you don't need to worry about that.' He shook himself. 'I have to go.'

'Already?'

'Flying visit, sir. I'm helping to arrange Poulder's funeral, would you believe? He's being buried in state, by order of the king . . . that is to say Jezal. Jezal dan Luthar.' He blew out his cheeks. 'Strange business.'

'The strangest.'

'All that time. A king's son sitting in the midst of us. I knew there had to be a reason why he was so bloody good at cards.' He slapped West on the back again. 'Good to see you looking so well, sir. Knew they wouldn't be able to keep you down for long!'

'Keep out of trouble!' West called after him as he made for the door.

'Always!' The big man grinned as he pulled it shut.

West took his stick from the side of the bed, gritted his teeth as he pushed himself up to standing. He hobbled across the expanse of chequered tiles to the window, one painstaking step at a time, and finally stood blinking into the morning sunlight.

Looking down on the palace gardens it was hard to believe that there had been any war, that there were any acres of ruins, any heaps of dead. The lawns were neatly trimmed, the gravel well-raked. The last few brown leaves had fallen from the trees, leaving the smooth wood black and bare.

It had been autumn when he set out for Angland. Could it really have been only a year ago? He had lived through four great battles, a siege, an ambush, a bloody mêlée. He had witnessed a duel to the death. He had stood at the centre of great events. He had survived a slog of hundreds of miles through the bleak Angland winter. He had found new comrades in unlikely places, and he had seen friends dead before his eyes. Burr, Kaspas, Cathil, Threetrees, all back to the mud, as the Northmen said. He had faced death, and he had delivered it. He shifted his aching arm uncomfortably in the sling. He had murdered the heir to the throne of the Union with his own hands. He had risen, by a stroke of chance that verged on the impossible, to one of the highest posts in the nation.

Busy year.

And now it was over. Peace, of a kind. The city was in ruins, and every man had to do his part, but he owed himself a rest. Surely no one would begrudge him that. Perhaps he could insist on Ariss dan Kaspas to tend him to health. A rich and beautiful nurse seemed like just the thing he needed . . .

'You shouldn't be up.' Ardee stood in the doorway.

He grinned. It was good to see her. For the last few days they had been close. Almost as it had been long ago, when they were children. 'Don't worry.

Getting stronger every day.'

She walked across to the window. 'Oh yes, in a few weeks time you'll be strong as a little girl. Back to bed.' She slid one arm under his and took the cane from his hand, started to guide him back across the room. West made no effort to resist. If he was being honest, he was starting to feel tired anyway. 'We're taking no chances,' she was saying. 'You're all I have, I'm sorry to say. Unless you count that other invalid, my good friend Sand dan Glokta.'

West almost snorted with laughter. 'That worked out?'

'The man is utterly loathsome, of course, in a way. Terrifying and pitiful at once. And yet . . . having had no one else to talk to, I find that I've strangely warmed to him.'

'Huh. He used to be loathsome in an entirely different way. I've never been sure quite why I warmed to him then. And yet I did. I suppose there's no—'

He felt a sudden wave of sickness cramp up his guts, stumbled and almost fell, sank onto the bed, stiff leg stretched out in front of him. His vision was blurry, his head spun. He pressed his face into his palms, teeth gritted, as spit rushed into his mouth. He felt Ardee's hand on his shoulder.

'Are you alright?'

'Ah, yes, it's just . . . I've been having these sick spells.' The feeling was already passing. He rubbed at his sore temples, then the back of his skull. He lifted his head, and smiled up at her again. 'I'm sure it's nothing.'

'Collem . . .'

There was hair wedged between his fingers. A lot of hair. His own, by the colour. He blinked at it, mystified, then coughed with disbelieving laughter. A wet, salty cough from down under his ribs. 'I know it's been thinning for years,' he croaked, 'but really, this is too much.'

Ardee did not laugh. She was staring at his hands, eyes wide with horror.

Patriotic Duties

Glokta winced as he carefully lowered himself into his chair. There was no fanfare to mark the moment when his aching arse touched the hard wood. No round of applause. Only a sharp clicking in his burning knee. *And yet it is a moment of the greatest significance, and not only for me.*

The designers of the White Chamber's furniture had ventured beyond austerity and into the realm of profound discomfort. *One would have thought that they could have stretched to some upholstery for the most powerful men in the realm. Perhaps the intention was to remind the occupants that one should never become too comfortable at the pinnacle of power.* He glanced sideways, and saw Bayaz watching him. *Well, uncomfortable is about as good as I ever get. Have I not often said so?* He winced as he tried to worm his way forwards, the legs of his chair squealing noisily against the floor.

Long ago, when I was handsome, young, and promising, I dreamed of one day sitting at this table as a noble Lord Marshal, or a respected High Justice, or even an honourable Lord Chamberlain. Who could ever have suspected, even in their darkest moments, that beautiful Sand dan Glokta would one day sit on the Closed Council as the feared, the abhorred, the all-powerful Arch Lector of the Inquisition? He could scarcely keep the smile from his toothless mouth as he slumped back against the unyielding wood.

Not everyone appeared amused by his sudden elevation, however. King Jezal in particular glowered at Glokta with the most profound dislike. 'Remarkable that you are confirmed already in your position,' he snapped.

Bayaz interposed. 'Such things can happen quickly when there is the will, your Majesty.'

'After all,' observed Hoff, stealing a rare moment away from his goblet to sweep the table with a melancholy glance, 'our numbers are most sadly reduced.'

All too true. Several chairs loomed significantly empty. Marshal Varuz was missing, presumed dead. *Certainly dead, given that he was conducting the defence from the Tower of Chains, a structure now scattered widely over the streets of the city. Farewell, my old fencing master, farewell.* High Justice Marovia had also left a vacant seat. *No doubt they are still trying to scrape the frozen meat from the walls of his office. Adieu to my third suitor, I fear.* Lord Valdis, Commander of the Knights Herald, was not in attendance. *Keeping watch on the southern gate, I understand, when the Gurkish detonated their explosive powder. Body never found, nor ever will be, one suspects.* Lord Admiral Reutzer too, was absent. *Wounded at sea by a cutlass to the guts. Not expected to survive, alas.*

Truly, the pinnacle of power is less crowded than it used to be.

'Marshal West could not be with us?' asked Lord Chancellor Halleck.

'He regrets that he cannot.' General Kroy seemed to pinch off each word with his teeth. 'He has asked me to take his place, and speak for the army.'

‘And how is the Marshal?’

‘Wounded.’

‘And further afflicted by the wasting illness that has recently swept the Agriont,’ added the king, frowning grimly down the table at the First of the Magi.

‘Regrettable.’ Bayaz’ face showed not the slightest sign of regret or anything else.

‘A terrible business,’ lamented Hoff. ‘The physicians are utterly baffled.’

‘Few survive.’ Luthar’s glare had become positively deadly.

‘Let us ardently hope,’ gushed Torlichorm, ‘that Marshal West is one of the lucky ones.’ *Let us hope so indeed. Although hope changes nothing.*

‘To business, then?’ Wine gurgled from the pitcher as Hoff filled his goblet for the second time since entering the room. ‘How fares the campaign, General Kroy?’

‘The Gurkish army is utterly routed. We have pursued them towards Keln, where some few managed to flee on the remnant of their fleet. Duke Orso’s ships soon put an end to that, however. The Gurkish invasion is over. Victory is ours.’ *And yet he frowns as though he is admitting defeat.*

‘Excellent.’

‘The nation owes a debt of thanks to its brave soldiers.’

‘Our congratulations, General.’

Kroy stared down at the table-top. ‘The congratulations belong to Marshal West, who gave the orders, and to General Poulder and the others who gave their lives carrying them out. I was no more than an observer.’

‘But you played your part, and admirably.’ Hoff raised his goblet. ‘Given the unfortunate absence of Marshal Varuz, I feel confident his Majesty will soon wish to confer a promotion upon you.’ He glanced towards the king, and Luthar grunted his unenthusiastic assent.

‘I am honoured to serve in whatever capacity his Majesty should decide, of course. The prisoners are a more urgent matter, however. We have many thousands of them, and no food with which to—’

‘We have not enough food for our own soldiers, our own citizens, our own wounded,’ said Hoff, dabbing at his wet lips.

‘Ransom any men of quality back to the Emperor?’ suggested Torlichorm.

‘There were precious few men of quality among their entire damn army.’

Bayaz frowned down the table. ‘If they are of no value to the Emperor they are certainly of no value to us. Let them starve.’

A few men shifted uncomfortably. ‘We are talking of thousands of lives, here —’ began Kroy.

The gaze of the First of the Magi fell upon him like a great stone and squashed his objections flat. ‘I know what we are talking of, General. Enemies. Invaders.’

‘Surely we can find a way?’ threw in the king. ‘Could we not ship them back to Kantic shores? It would be a shameful epilogue to our victory if—’

‘Each prisoner fed is one citizen that must go hungry. Such is the terrible arithmetic of power. A difficult decision, your Majesty, but those are the only kind we have in this room. What would your opinion be, Arch Lector?’

The eyes of the king, and the old men in the high chairs, all turned towards

Glokta. *Ah, we know what must be done, and we do not flinch, and so forth. Let the monster pronounce the sentence, so the rest can feel like decent men.* 'I have never been a great admirer of the Gurkish.' Glokta shrugged his aching shoulders. 'Let them starve.'

King Jezal settled further into his throne with an even grimmer frown. *Could it be that our monarch is a touch less house-broken than the First of the Magi would like to believe?* Lord Chancellor Halleck cleared his throat. 'Now that victory is ours, our first concern, without question, is the clearing of the ruins, and the rebuilding of the damage caused by . . .' his eyes shifted nervously sideways to Bayaz, and back. 'Gurkish aggression.'

'Hear, hear.'

'Rebuilding. We are all agreed.'

'The costs,' and Halleck winced as if the word caused him pain, 'even of clearing the wreckage in the Agriont alone, may run to many tens of thousands of marks. The price of rebuilding, many millions. When we consider the extensive damage to the city of Adua besides . . . the costs . . .' Halleck scowled again and rubbed at his ill-shaved jaw with one hand. 'Difficult even to guess at.'

'We can only do our best.' Hoff sadly shook his head. 'And find one mark at a time.'

'I, for one, suggest we look to the nobles,' said Glokta. There were several grumbles of agreement.

'His Eminence makes a fine point.'

'A sharp curtailment of the powers of the Open Council,' said Halleck.

'Harsh taxes on those who did not provide material support in the recent war.'

'Excellent! Trim the nobles' sails. Damn parasites.'

'Sweeping reforms. Lands returned to the crown. Levies on inheritance.'

'On inheritance! An inspired notion!'

'The Lord Governors too must be brought into the fold.'

'Skald and Meed. Yes. They have long enjoyed too much independence.'

'Meed can hardly be blamed, his province is a wreck—'

'This is not a question of blame,' said Bayaz. *No indeed, we all know where that lies.* 'This is a question of control. Victory has given us the opportunity for reform.'

'We need to centralise!'

'Westport as well. Too long they have played us off against the Gurkish.'

'They need us now.'

'Perhaps we should extend the Inquisition to their city?' suggested Glokta.

'A foothold in Styria!'

'We must rebuild!' The First of the Magi thumped at the table with one meaty fist. 'Better and more glorious even than before. The statues in the Kingsway may have fallen, but they have left space for new ones.'

'A new era of prosperity,' said Halleck, eyes shining.

'A new era of power,' said Hoff, raising his goblet.

'A golden age?' Bayaz looked up the table at Glokta.

'An age of unity and opportunity for all!' said the king.

His offering fell somewhat flat. Eyes swivelled uncomfortably toward the

king's end of the table. *Quite as if he noisily farted, rather than spoke.* 'Er . . . yes, your Majesty,' said Hoff. 'Opportunities.' *For anyone lucky enough to sit on the Closed Council, that is.*

'Perhaps heavier taxes on the merchant guilds?' proffered Halleck. 'As our last Arch Lector had in mind. The banks also. Such a move could produce vast incomes—'

'No,' said Bayaz, offhand. 'Not the guilds, not the banks. The free operation of those noble institutions provides wealth and security to all. The future of the nation lies in commerce.'

Halleck humbly inclined his head. *With more than a hint of fear, do I detect?* 'Of course, Lord Bayaz, you are right. I freely admit my mistake.'

The Magus moved smoothly on. 'Perhaps the banks would be willing to extend a loan to the crown, however.'

'An excellent idea,' said Glokta without hesitation. 'The banking house of Valint and Balk are a trustworthy and long-founded institution. They were of profound value during my attempts to defend Dagoska. I am sure we could count on their help again.' Bayaz' smile was almost imperceptible. 'In the meantime the lands, assets, and titles of the traitor Lord Brock have been requisitioned by the crown. Their sale will raise a considerable sum.'

'And what of the man himself, Arch Lector?'

'It would appear he fled the nation along with the last of the Gurmish. We assume that he is still their . . . guest.'

'Their puppet, you mean.' Bayaz sucked at his teeth. 'Unfortunate. He may continue to be a focus for discontent.'

'Two of his children are under lock and key in the House of Questions. His daughter and one of the sons. An exchange might be possible—'

'Brock? Ha!' barked Hoff. 'He wouldn't swap his own life for the whole world and everything in it.'

Glokta raised his eyebrows. 'Then perhaps a demonstration of intent? A clear message that treason will not and will never be tolerated?'

'Never a bad message to send,' growled Bayaz to affirmative mutterings from the old men.

'A public declaration of Brock's guilt, then, and his responsibility for the ruin of the city of Adua. Accompanied by a pair of hangings.' *A shame for them, to have been born to such an ambitious father, but everyone loves a public killing.* 'Does anyone have a preference for a certain day or—'

'There will be no hangings.' The king was frowning levelly at Bayaz.

Hoff blinked. 'But your Majesty, you cannot allow—'

'There has been enough bloodshed. Far more than enough. Release Lord Brock's children.' There were several sharp intakes of breath around the table. 'Allow them to join their father, or remain in the Union as private citizens, as they desire.' Bayaz glared balefully from the far end of the room, but the king did not appear intimidated. 'The war is over. We won.' *The war never ends, and victory is temporary.* 'I would rather try to heal wounds than deepen them.' *A wounded enemy is the best kind, they are the easiest to kill.* 'Sometimes mercy buys you more than ruthlessness.'

Glokta cleared his throat. 'Sometimes.' *Though I myself have yet to see the circumstance.*

'Good,' said the king in a voice that brooked no argument. 'Then it is decided. Have we other pressing business? I need to make a tour of the hospitals, and then once more to clearing the wreckage.'

'Of course, your Majesty.' Hoff gave a sycophantic bow. 'Your care for you subjects does you much credit.'

Jezal stared at him for a moment, then snorted, and got up. He had already left the room before most of the old men had struggled to their feet. *And I take even longer.* When Glokta had finally wrestled his chair out of the way and grimaced to standing, he found Hoff was beside him, a frown on his ruddy face. 'We have a small problem,' he muttered.

'Indeed? Something we cannot raise with the rest of the Council?'

'I fear so. Something which, in particular, it would be better not to discuss before his Majesty.' Hoff looked quickly over his shoulder, waited for the last of the old men to pull the heavy door shut behind him and leave the two of them unobserved. *Secrets, then? How tremendously exciting.* 'Our absent Lord Marshal's sister.'

Glokta frowned. *Oh dear.* 'Ardee West? What of her?'

'I have it on good authority, that she finds herself in . . . a delicate condition.'

The familiar flurry of twitches ran up the left side of Glokta's face. 'Is that so?' *What a shame.* 'You are remarkably well informed about that lady's personal business.'

'It is my duty to be so.' Hoff leaned close and blasted Glokta with wine-stinking breath as he whispered. 'When you consider who the father might very well be.'

'And that is?' *Though I think we both already guess the answer.*

'Who else but the king?' hissed Hoff under his breath, a note of panic in his voice. 'You must be well aware that they were involved in . . . a liaison, to put it delicately, prior to his coronation. It is scarcely a secret. Now this? A bastard child! When the king's own claim to the throne is not of the purest? When he has so many enemies still on the Open Council? Such a child could be used against us, if it became known of, and it will, of course!' He leaned closer yet. 'Such a thing would constitute a threat to the state.'

'Indeed,' said Glokta icily. *All too unfortunately true. What a terrible, terrible shame.*

Hoff's fat fingers fussed nervously with each other. 'I realise that you have some association with the lady and her family. I understand entirely if this is one responsibility that you would rather be free of. I can make the arrangements with no—'

Glokta flashed his craziest grin. 'Are you implying that I lack sufficient ruthlessness for the murder of a pregnant mother, Lord Chamberlain?' His voice bounced loud from the hard white walls, merciless as a knife-thrust.

Hoff winced, his eyes darting nervously towards the door. 'I am sure you would not flinch from any patriotic duty—'

'Good. You may rest easy, then. Our mutual friend did not select me for this role because of my soft heart.' *Anything but.* 'I will deal with the matter.'

The same small, brick-built house in the same unremarkable street that Glokta had visited so often before. *The same house where I spent so many enjoyable afternoons. As close as I have come to comfort since I was dragged drooling from the Emperor's prisons.* He slid his right hand into his pocket, felt the cold metal brush against his fingertips. *Why do I do this? Why? So that drunken arsehole Hoff can mop his brow at a calamity averted? So that Jezal dan Luthar can sit a hair more secure on his puppet throne?* He twisted his hips one way and then the other until he felt his back click. *She deserves so much better. But such is the terrible arithmetic of power.*

He pushed back the gate, hobbled up to the front door, and gave it a smart knock. It was a moment before the cringing maid answered. *Perhaps the one who alerted our court drunkard Lord Hoff to the unfortunate situation?* She showed him through into the over-furnished sitting room with little more than a mumble and left him there, staring at a small fire in the small grate. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the fireplace, and frowned.

Who is that man? That ruined shell? That shambling corpse? Can you even call it a face? So twisted and so lined, so etched with pain. What is this loathsome, pitiable species? Oh, if there is a God, protect me from this thing!

He tried to smile. Savage grooves cut through his corpse-pale skin, the hideous gap in his teeth yawned. The corner of his mouth trembled, his left eye twitched, narrower than the other, rimmed with angry red. *The smile seems to promise horrors more surely even than the frown.*

Has any man ever looked more of a villain? Has any man ever been more of a monster? Could any vestige of humanity possibly remain behind such a mask? How did beautiful Sand dan Glokta become . . . this? Mirrors. Even worse than stairs. His lip curled with disgust as he turned away.

Ardee stood in the doorway, watching him in silence. She looked well, to his mind, once he got over the awkward surprise of being observed. *Very well, with perhaps the slightest swelling about her stomach already? Three months along now? Four perhaps? Soon there will be no disguising it.*

'Your Eminence.' She gave him an appraising glance as she stepped into the room. 'White suits you.'

'Truly? You do not feel it makes the skull-like rings about my feverish eyes look all the darker?'

'Why, not at all. It perfectly matches your ghoulish pallor.'

Glokta leered his toothless grin. 'The very effect I was hoping for.'

'Have you come to take me on another tour of sewers, death and torture?'

'A repeat of that performance will probably never be possible, alas. I seem to have used up all my friends and most of my enemies in that one throw.'

'And regrettably the Gurmish army can no longer be with us.'

'Busy elsewhere, I understand.' He watched her cross to the table, look out of the window towards the street, the daylight glowing through her dark air, down the edge of her cheek.

'I trust that you are well?' she asked.

'Busier even than the Gurmish. A great deal to do. How is your brother? I have been meaning to visit him, but . . . ' *But I doubt even I could stand the stink of my own hypocrisy if I did. I cause pain. The easing of it is a foreign tongue to me.*

Ardee looked at her feet. 'He is always sick now. Every time I visit he is thinner. One of his teeth fell out while I was with him.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'It just came out while he was trying to eat. He nearly choked on it. But what can I do? What can anyone?'

'I am truly sorry to hear it.' *But it changes nothing.* 'I am sure that you are a great help to him.' *I am sure that there can be no help for him.* 'And how are you?'

'Better than most, I suppose.' She gave a long sigh, shook herself and tried to smile. 'Will you take some wine?'

'No, but don't let me stop you.' *I know you never have.*

But she only held the bottle for a moment, then set it down again. 'I have been trying to drink less, lately.'

'I have always felt that you should.' He took a slow step towards her. 'You feel sick, then, in the mornings?'

She looked sharply sideways, then swallowed, the thin muscles standing out from her neck. 'You know?'

'I am the Arch Lector,' he said as he came closer. 'I am supposed to know everything.'

Her shoulders sagged, her head dropped, she leaned forwards, both hands on the edge of the table. Glokta could see her eyelids fluttering, from the side. *Blinking back the tears. For all of her anger, and her cleverness, she's just as much in need of saving as anyone could be. But there is no one to come to the rescue. There is only me.*

'I suppose I made quite a mess of things, just as my brother said I would. Just as you said I would. You must be disappointed.'

Glokta felt his face twisting. *Something like a smile, perhaps. But not much joy in it.* 'I've spent most of my life disappointed. But not in you. It's a hard world. No one gets what they deserve.' *How long must we drag this out before we find the courage? It will not get any easier to do it. It must be now.*

'Ardee . . .' his voice sounded rough in his own ears. He took another limping step, his palm sweaty on the handle of his cane. She looked up at him, wet eyes gleaming, one hand on her stomach. She moved as if to take a step back. *A trace of fear, perhaps? And who can blame her? Can it be that she guesses at what is coming?*

'You know that I have always had a great liking and respect for your brother.' His mouth was dry, his tongue slurped awkwardly against his empty gums. Now is the time. 'Over the past months I have developed a great liking and respect for you.' A flurry of twitches ran up the side of his face and made a tear leak from his flickering eye. Now, now. 'Or . . . as close to such feelings as a man like myself can come, at least.' Glokta slid his hand into his pocket, carefully, so she would not notice. He felt the cold metal, the hard, merciless edges brushing against his skin. It must be now. His heart was pounding, his throat so tight that he could barely speak. 'This is difficult. I am . . . sorry.'

'For what?' she said, frowning at him.

Now.

He lurched towards her, snatching his hand from his pocket. She stumbled back against the table, eyes wide . . . and they both froze.

The ring glittered between them. A colossal, flashing diamond so large it

made the thick golden band look flimsy. So large it looks a joke. A fake. An absurd impossibility. *The biggest stone that Valint and Balk had to offer.*

'I have to ask you to marry me,' he croaked. The hand that held the ring was trembling like a dry leaf. *Put a cleaver in it and it's steady as a rock, but ask me to hold a ring and I nearly wet myself. Courage, Sand, courage.*

She stared down at the glittering stone, her mouth hanging stupidly open. *With shock? With horror? Marry this . . . thing? I would rather die!* 'Uh . . .' she muttered. 'I . . .'

'I know! I know, I'm as disgusted as you are, but . . . let me speak. Please.' He stared down at the floor, his mouth twisting as he said the words. 'I am not stupid enough to pretend that you might ever come to love . . . a man like me, or think of me with anything warmer than pity. This is a question of necessity. You should not flinch from it because . . . of what I am. They know you are carrying the king's child.'

'They?' she muttered.

'Yes. They. The child is a threat to them. You are a threat to them. This way I can protect you. I can give your child legitimacy. It must be our child, now and forever.' Still she stared at the ring in silence. *Like a prisoner staring horrified upon the instruments, and deciding whether to confess. Two awful choices, but which is the worse?*

'There are many things that I can give you. Safety. Security. Respect. You will have the best of everything. A high place in society, for what such things are worth. No one will dream of laying a finger upon you. No one will dare to talk down to you. People will whisper behind your back, of course. But they will whisper of your beauty, your wit, and your surpassing virtue.' Glokta narrowed his eyes. 'I will see to it.'

She looked up at him, and swallowed. *And now comes the refusal. My thanks, but I would rather die.* 'I should be honest with you. When I was younger . . . I did some foolish things.' Her mouth twisted. 'This isn't even the first bastard I've carried. My father threw me down the stairs and I lost it. He nearly killed me. I didn't think that it could happen again.'

'We have all done things we are not proud of.' *You should hear my confessions, some time. Or rather no one ever should.* 'That changes nothing. I promised that I would look to your welfare. I see no other way.'

'Then yes.' She took the ring from him without any ceremony and slid it onto her finger. 'There is nothing to think about, is there?' *Scarcely the gushing acceptance, the tearful acquiescence, the joyful surrender that one reads of in the story books. A reluctant business arrangement. An occasion for sad reflection on all that might have been, but is not.*

'Who would have thought,' she murmured, staring at the jewel on her finger, 'when I watched you fence with my brother, all those years ago, that I would one day wear your ring? You always were the man of my dreams.'

And now of your nightmares. 'Life takes strange turns. The circumstances are not quite what anyone would have predicted.' *And so I save two lives. How much evil can that possibly outweigh? Yet it is something on the right side of the scales, at least. Every man needs something on the right side of the scales.*

Her dark eyes rolled up to his. 'Could you not have afforded a bigger stone?'

'Only by raiding the treasury,' he croaked. *A kiss would be traditional, but*

under the circumstances—

She stepped towards him, lifting one arm. He lurched back, winced at a twinge in his hip. 'Sorry. Somewhat . . . out of practice.'

'If I am to do this, I mean to do it properly.'

'To make the best of it, do you mean?'

'To make something of it, anyway.' She drew closer still. He had to force himself to stay where he was. She looked into his eyes. She reached up, slowly, and touched his cheek, and set his eyelid flickering. *Foolishness. How many women have touched me before? And yet that was another life. Another—*

Her hand slid round his face, her fingertips pressing tight into his jaw. His neck clicked as she pulled him close. He felt her breath warm on his chin. Her lips brushed against his, gently, and back the other way. He heard her make a soft grunt in her throat, and it made his own breath catch. *Pretence, of course. How could any woman want to touch this ruined body? Kiss this ruined face? Even I am repulsed at the thought of it. Pretence, and yet I must applaud her for the effort.*

His left leg trembled and he had to cling tight to his cane. The breath hissed fast through his nose. Her face was sideways on to his, their mouths locked together, sucking wetly. The tip of her tongue licked at his empty gums. *Pretence, of course, what else could it be ? And yet she does it so very, very well . .*

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The First Law

Ferro sat, and she stared at her hand. The hand that had held the Seed. It looked the same as ever, yet it felt different. Cold, still. Very cold. She had wrapped it in blankets. She had bathed it in warm water. She had held it near the fire, so near that she had burned herself.

Nothing helped.

‘Ferro . . .’ Whispered so quiet it could almost have been the wind around the window-frame.

She jerked to her feet, knife clutched in her fist. She stared into the corners of her room. All empty. She bent down to look under the bed, under the tall cupboard. She tore the hangings out of the way with her free hand. No one. She had known there would be no one.

Yet she still heard them.

A thumping at the door and she whipped round again, breath hissing through her teeth. Another dream? Another ghost? More heavy knocks.

‘Come in?’ she growled.

The door opened. Bayaz. He raised one eyebrow at her knife. ‘You are altogether too fond of blades, Ferro. You have no enemies here.’

She glared at the Magus through narrowed eyes. She was not so sure. ‘What happened, in the wind?’

‘What happened?’ Bayaz shrugged. ‘We won.’

‘What were those shapes? Those shadows.’

‘I saw nothing, aside from Mamun and his Hundred Words receiving the punishment they deserved.’

‘Did you not hear voices?’

‘Over the thunder of our victory? I heard nothing.’

‘I did.’ Ferro lowered the knife and slid it into her belt. She worked the fingers of her hand, the same, and yet changed. ‘I still hear them.’

‘And what do they tell you, Ferro?’

‘They speak of locks, and gates, and doors, and the opening of them. Always they talk of opening them. They ask about the Seed. Where is it?’

‘Safe.’ Bayaz gazed blankly at her. ‘Remember, if you truly hear the creatures of the Other Side, that they are made of lies.’

‘They are not alone in that. They ask me to break the First Law. Just as you did.’

‘Open to interpretation.’ Bayaz had a proud twist to the corner of his mouth. As if he had achieved something wonderful. ‘I tempered Glustrod’s disciplines with the techniques of the Master Maker, and used the Seed as the engine for my Art. The results were . . .’ He took a long, satisfied breath. ‘Well, you were there. It was, above all, a triumph of will.’

‘You tampered with the seals. You put the world at risk. The Tellers of Secrets . . .’

'The First Law is a paradox. Whenever you change a thing you borrow from the world below, and there are always risks. If I have crossed a line it is a line of scale only. The world is safe, is it not? I make no apologies for the ambition of my vision.'

'They are burying men, and women, and children, in pits for a hundred. Just as they did in Aulcus. This sickness . . . it is because of what we did. Is that ambition, then? The size of the graves?'

Bayaz gave a dismissive toss of his head. 'An unexpected side-effect. The price of victory, I fear, is the same now as it was in the Old Time, and always will be.' He fixed her with his eye, and there was a threat in it. A challenge. 'But if I broke the First Law, what then? In what court will you have me judged? By what jury? Will you release Tolomei from the darkness to give evidence? Will you seek out Zacharus to read the charge? Will you drag Cawneil from the edge of the World to deliver the verdict? Will you bring great Juvenis from the land of the dead to pronounce the sentence? I think not. I am First of the Magi. I am the last authority and I say . . . I am righteous.'

'You? No.'

'Yes, Ferro. Power makes all things right. That is my first law, and my last. That is the only law that I acknowledge.'

'Zacharus warned me,' she murmured, thinking of the endless plain, the wild-eyed old man with his circling birds. 'He told me to run, and never stop running. I should have listened to him.'

'To that bloated bladder of self-righteousness?' Bayaz snorted. 'Perhaps you should have, but that ship has sailed. You waved it away happily from the shore, and chose instead to feed your fury. Gladly you fed it. Let us not pretend that I deceived you. You knew we were to walk dark paths.'

'I did not expect . . .' she worked her icy fingers into a trembling fist. 'This.'

'What did you expect, then? I must confess I thought you made of harder stuff. Let us leave the philosophising to those with more time and fewer scores to settle. Guilt, and regret, and righteousness? It is like talking with the great King Jezal. And who has the patience for that?' He turned towards the door. 'You should stay near me. Perhaps, in time, Khalul will send other agents. Then I will have need of your talents once again.'

She snorted. 'And until then? Sit here with the shadows for company?'

'Until then, smile, Ferro, if you can remember how.' Bayaz flashed his white grin at her. 'You have your vengeance.'

The wind tore around her, rushed around her, full of shadows. She knelt at one end of a screaming tunnel, touching the very sky. The world was thin and brittle as a sheet of glass, ready to crack. Beyond it a bottomless void, filled with voices.

'Let us in . . .'

'No!' She thrashed her way free and struggled up, stood panting on the floor beside her bed, every muscle rigid. But there was no one to fight. Another dream, only.

Her own fault, for letting herself sleep.

A long strip of moonlight reached towards her across the tiles. The window at its end stood ajar, a cold night breeze washed through and chilled her sweat-beaded skin. She walked to it, frowning, pushed it shut and slid the bolt. She turned around.

A figure stood in the thick shadows beside the door. A one-armed figure, swathed in rags. The few pieces of armour still strapped to him were scuffed and gouged. His face was a dusty ruin, torn skin hanging in scraps from white bone, but even so, Ferro knew him.

Mamun.

'We meet again, devil-blood.' His dry voice rustled like old paper.

'I am dreaming,' she hissed.

'You will wish that you were.' He was across the room in a breathless instant. His one hand closed round her throat like a lock snapping shut. 'Digging my way out of that ruination one handful of dirt at a time has given me a hunger.' His dry breath tickled at her face. 'I will make myself a new arm from your flesh, and with it I will strike down Bayaz and take vengeance for great Juvens. The Prophet has seen it, and I will turn his vision into truth.' He lifted her, effortlessly, crushed her back against the wall, her heels kicking against the panelling.

The hand squeezed. Her chest heaved, but no air moved inside her neck. She struggled with the fingers, ripped at them with her nails, but they were made of iron, made of stone, tight as a hanged man's collar. She fought and twisted but he did not shift a hair's breadth. She fiddled with Mamun's ruined face, her fingers worked their way into his ripped cheek, tore at the dusty flesh inside but his eyes did not even blink. It had grown cold in the room.

'Say your prayers, child,' he whispered, broken teeth grinding, 'and hope that God is merciful.'

She was growing weaker now. Her lungs were bursting. She tore at him still, but each effort was less. Weaker and weaker. Her arms drooped, her legs dangled, her eyelids were heavy, heavy. All was terrible cold.

'Now,' he whispered, breath smoking. He brought her down, opening his mouth, his torn lips sliding back from his splintered teeth. 'Now.'

Her finger stabbed into his neck. Through his skin and into his dry flesh, up to the knuckle. It drove his head away. Her other hand wormed round his, prised it from her throat, bent his fingers backwards. She felt the bones in them snap, crunch, splinter as she dropped to the floor. White frost crept out across the black window-panes beside her, squeaked under her bare feet as she twisted Mamun round and rammed him against the wall, crushed his body into the splintering panels, the cracking plaster. Dust showered down from the force of it.

She drove her finger further into his throat, upwards, inwards. It was easy to do it. There was no end to her strength. It came from the other side of the divide. The Seed had changed her, as it had changed Tolomei, and there could be no going back.

Ferro smiled.

'Take my flesh, would you? You have had your last meal, Mamun.'

The tip of her finger slid out between his teeth, met her thumb and hooked him like a fish. With a jerk of her wrist she ripped the jaw-bone from his head

and tossed it clattering away. His tongue lolled inside a ragged mass of dusty flesh.

'Say your prayers, Eater,' she hissed, 'and hope that God is merciful.' She clamped her palms around either side of his head. A long squeak came from his nose. His shattered hand pawed at her, uselessly. His skull bent, then flattened, then burst apart, splinters of bone flying. She let the body fall, dust sliding out across the floor, curling round her feet.

'Yes . . .'

She did not startle. She did not stare. She knew where the voice came from. Everywhere and nowhere.

She stepped to the window and pulled it open. She jumped through, dropped a dozen strides down to the turf, and stood. The night was full of sounds, but she was silent. She padded across the moonlit grass, crunching frozen where her bare feet fell, crept up a long stair and onto the walls. The voices followed her.

'Wait.'

'The Seed!'

'Ferro.'

'Let us in . . .'

She ignored them. An armoured man stared out into the night, out towards the House of the Maker, a blacker outline against the black sky. A wedge of darkness over the Agriont within which there were no stars, no moonlit clouds, no light at all. Ferro wondered if Tolomei was lurking in the shadows inside, scratching at its gates. Scratching, scratching, forever. She had wasted her chance at vengeance.

Ferro would not do the same.

She slid down the battlements, around the guard, hugging his cloak tight about his shoulders as she passed. Up onto the parapet and she leaped, the wind rushing against her skin. She cleared the moat, creaking ice spreading out across the water beneath her. The cobbled ground beyond rushed up. Her feet thumped into it and she rolled over, over, away into the buildings. Her clothes were torn from the fall but there was no mark on her skin. Not so much as a bead of blood.

'No, Ferro.'

'Back, and find the Seed!'

'It is near him.'

'Bayaz has it.'

Bayaz. Perhaps when she was done in the South, she would return. When she had buried the great Uthman-ul-Dosht in the ruins of his own palace. When she had sent Khalul, and his Eaters, and his priests to hell. Perhaps then she would come back, and teach the First of the Magi the lesson that he deserved. The lesson that Tolomei meant to teach him. But then, liar or not, he had kept his word to her, in the end. He had given her the means of vengeance.

Now she would take it.

Ferro stole through the silent ruins of the city, quiet and quick as a night breeze. South, towards the docks. She would find a way. South, across the sea to Gurkhul, and then . . .

The voices whispered to her. A thousand voices. They spoke of the gates that Euz closed, and of the seals that Euz put upon them. They begged her to open them. They told her to break them. They told her how, and they commanded her to do it.

But Ferro only smiled. Let them speak.

She had no masters.

Tea and Threats

Logen frowned. He frowned at the wide hall, and its glittering mirrors, and the many powerful people in it. He scowled at the great Lords of the Union facing him. Two hundred of them or more, sitting in a muttering crowd around the opposite side of the room. Their false talk, and their false smiles, and their false faces cloyed at him like too much honey. But he felt no better about the folk on his side of the hall, sharing the high platform with him and the great King Jezal.

There was the sneering cripple who'd asked all the questions that day in the tower, dressed now all in white. There was a fat man with a face full of broken veins, looked as if he started each day with a bottle. There was a tall, lean bastard in a black breastplate covered in fancy gold, with a soft smile and hard little eyes. As shifty a pack of liars as Logen had ever laid eyes on, but there was one worse than all the rest together.

Bayaz sat with an easy grin on his face, as if everything had turned out just the way he'd planned. Maybe it had. Damn wizard. Logen should have known better than to trust a man with no hair. The spirits had warned him that Magi have their own purposes, but he'd taken no notice, plunged on blindly, hoping for the best, just like always. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he never listens. One fault among many.

His eyes swivelled the other way, towards Jezal. He looked comfortable enough in his kingly robes, golden crown gleaming on his head, golden chair even bigger than the one that Logen was sitting in. His wife sat beside him. She had a frosty pride about her, maybe, but no worse for that. Beautiful as a winter morning. And she had this look on her face, when she looked at Jezal. A fierce kind of look, as if she could hardly stop herself tearing into him with her teeth. That lucky bastard always seemed to come out alright. She could've had a little bite out of Logen if she'd wanted, but what woman in her right mind did?

He frowned most of all at himself in the mirrors opposite, raised up on the high platform beside Jezal and his queen. He looked a sullen and brooding, scarred and fearsome monster beside that beautiful pair. A man made of murder, then swaddled in rich coloured cloth and rare white furs, set with polished rivets and bright buckles, all topped off with a great golden chain around his shoulders. That same chain that Bethod had worn. His hands stuck from the ends of his fur-trimmed sleeves, marked and brutal, one finger missing, grasping at the arms of his gilded chair. King's clothes, maybe, but killer's hands. He looked like the villain in some old children's story. The ruthless warrior, clawed his way to power with fire and steel. Climbed to a throne up a mountain of corpses. Maybe he was that man.

He squirmed around, new cloth scratching at his clammy skin. He'd come a long way, since he dragged himself out of a river without even a pair of boots

to his name. Dragged himself across the High Places with nothing but a pot for company. He'd come a long way, but he wasn't sure he hadn't liked himself better before. He'd laughed when he'd heard that Bethod was calling himself a king. Now here he was, doing the same, and even worse suited to the job. Say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say he's a cunt. Simple as that. And that's not something any man likes to admit about himself.

The drunkard, Hoff, was doing most of the talking. 'The Lords' Round lies in ruins, alas. For the time being, therefore, until a venue of grandeur suitable for this noble institution has been built – a new Lords' Round, richer and greater than the last – it has been decided that the Open Council will stand in recess.'

There was a pause. 'In recess?' someone muttered.

'How will we be heard?'

'Where will the nobles have their voice?'

'The nobles will speak through the Closed Council.' Hoff had that tone a man uses talking down to a child. 'Or may apply to the Under-Secretary for Audiences to obtain a hearing with the king.'

'But any peasant may do so!'

Hoff raised his eyebrows. 'True.'

A ripple of anger spread out through the Lords in front of them. Logen might not have understood too much about politics, but he could recognise one set of men getting stood on by another. Never a nice thing to be part of, but at least he was on the side doing the standing, for once.

'The king and the nation are one and the same!' Bayaz' harsh voice cut over the chatter. 'You only borrow your lands from him. He regrets that he requires some portion of them back, but such is the spur of necessity.'

'A quarter.' The cripple licked at his empty gums with a faint sucking sound. 'From each one of you.'

'This will not stand!' shouted an angry old man in the front row.

'You think not, Lord Isher?' Bayaz only smiled at him. 'Those who do not think so may join Lord Brock in dusty exile, and surrender all their lands to the crown instead of just a portion.'

'This is an outrage!' shouted another man. 'Always, the king has been first among equals, the greatest of nobles, not above them. Our votes brought him to the throne, and we refuse—'

'You dance close to a line, Lord Heugen.' The cripple's face twitched with ugly spasms as he frowned across the room. 'You might wish to remain on that side of it, where it is safe, and warm, and loyal. The other side will not suit you so well, I think.' A long tear ran from his flickering left eye and down his hollow cheek. 'The Surveyor General will be assessing your estates over the coming months. It would be wise for you all to lend him your fullest assistance.'

A lot of men were on their feet now, scowling, shaking fists. 'This is outrageous!'

'Unprecedented!'

'Unacceptable!'

'We refuse to be intimidated!'

Jeza sprang from his throne, raising his jewelled sword high, and struck at the platform again and again with the end of the scabbard, filling the room

with booming echoes. 'I am the king!' he bellowed at the suddenly silent chamber. 'I am not offering a choice, I am issuing a royal decree! Adua will be rebuilt, and more glorious than ever! This is the price! You have grown too used to a weak crown, my Lords! Believe me when I say that those days are now behind us!'

Bayaz leaned sideways to mutter in Logen's ear. 'Surprisingly good at this, isn't he?'

The Lords grumbled, but they sat back down as Jezal spoke on, voice washing around the room with easy confidence, sheathed sword still held firmly in one fist. 'Those who lent me their wholehearted support in the recent crisis will be exempt. But that list, to your shame, is all too brief. Why, it was friends from outside the borders of the Union who sustained us in our time of need!'

The man in black swept from his chair. 'I, Orso of Talins, stand always at the side of my royal son and daughter!' He seized Jezal's face and kissed both his cheeks. Then he did the same with the queen. 'Their friends are my friends.' He said it with a smile, but the meaning was hard to miss. 'Their enemies? Ah! You all are clever men. You can guess the rest.'

'I thank you for your part in our deliverance,' said Jezal. 'You have our gratitude. The war between the Union and the North is at an end. The tyrant Bethod is dead, and there is a new order. I am proud to call the man who threw him down my friend. Logen Ninefingers! King of the Northmen!' He beamed, holding out his hand. 'It is fitting that we should stride into this bold new future as brothers.'

'Aye,' said Logen, pushing himself painfully up from his chair. 'Right.' He folded Jezal in a hug, slapped him on the back with a thump that echoed round the great chamber. 'Reckon we'll be staying our side of the Whiteflow from now on. Unless my brother has trouble down here, of course.' He swept the sullen old men in the front row with a graveyard scowl. 'Don't make me fucking come back here.' He sat down in the big chair and frowned out. The Bloody-Nine might not have known too much about politics, but he knew how to make a threat alright.

'We won the war!' Jezal rattled the golden hilt of his sword, then slid it smoothly back through the clasp on his belt. 'Now we must win the peace!'

'Well said, your Majesty, well said!' The red-faced drunkard stood, not giving anyone the chance to get a word in. 'Then only one order of business remains before the Open Council stands in recess.' He turned with an oily smile and a hand-rubbing bow. 'Let us offer our thanks to Lord Bayaz, the First of the Magi, who, by the wisdom of his council and the power of his Art, drove out the invader and saved the Union!' He began to clap. The cripple Gloкта joined him, then Duke Orso.

A burly lord in the front row sprang up. 'Lord Bayaz!' he roared, smashing his fat hands together. Soon the whole hall was resounding with reluctant applause. Even Heugen joined in. Even Isher, although he had a look on his face as if he was clapping at his own burial. Logen let his hands stay where they were. If he was honest, he felt a touch sick even being there. Sick and angry. He slumped back in his chair, and kept on frowning.

Jezal watched the great worthies of the Union file unhappily out of the Chamber of Mirrors. Great men. Isher, Barezin, Heugen, and all the rest. Men that he had once gaped at the sight of. All humbled. He could hardly keep the smile from his face as they grumbled their helpless discontent. It felt almost like being a king, until he caught sight of his queen.

Terez and her father, the Grand Duke Orso, were engaged in what appeared to be a heartfelt argument, carried out in expressive Styrian, accentuated on both sides by violent hand movements. Jezal might have been relieved that he was not the only family member she appeared to despise, had he not suspected that he was the subject of their argument. He heard a soft scraping behind him, and was mildly disgusted to see the twisted face of his new Arch Lector.

‘Your Majesty.’ Glokta spoke softly, as if he planned to discuss secrets, frowning towards Terez and her father. ‘Might I ask . . . is all well between you and the queen?’ His voice dropped even lower. ‘I understand that you rarely sleep in the same room.’

Jezal was on the point of giving the cripple a backhanded blow across the face for his impudence. Then he caught Terez looking at him, out of the corner of his eye. That look of utter contempt that was his usual treatment as a husband. He felt his shoulders sag. ‘She can scarcely stand to be in the same country as me, let alone the same bed. The woman’s an utter bitch!’ he snarled, then hung his head and stared down at the floor. ‘What am I to do?’

Glokta worked his neck to one side, then the other, and Jezal suppressed a shudder as he heard a loud click. ‘Let me speak to the queen, your Majesty. I can be quite persuasive when I have the mind. I understand your difficulties. I am myself but recently married.’

Jezal dreaded to think what manner of monster might have accepted this monster as a husband. ‘Truly?’ he asked, feigning interest. ‘Who is the lady?’

‘I believe that the two of you are distantly acquainted. Ardee is her name. Ardee dan Glokta.’ And the cripple’s lips slid back to display the sickening hole in his front teeth.

‘But not—’

‘My old friend Collem West’s sister, yes.’ Jezal stared, speechless. Glokta gave a stiff bow. ‘I accept your congratulations.’ He turned away, limped to the edge of the platform, and began to lurch down the steps, leaning heavily on his cane.

Jezal could hardly contain his cold shock, his crushing disappointment, his utter horror. He could not conceive of what blackmail that shambling monstrosity might have employed to trap her. Perhaps she had simply been desperate when Jezal abandoned her. Perhaps, with her brother ill, she had been left with nowhere else to turn. Only the other morning, in the hospital, the sight of her had tugged at something in him, just the way it used to. He had been thinking to himself that perhaps, one day, with time . . .

Now even such pleasurable fancies were brought crashing to the ground. Ardee was married, and to a man that Jezal despised. A man who sat on his own Closed Council. To make matters even worse, a man to whom he had, in a moment of madness, just now confessed the total emptiness of his own

marriage. He had made himself appear weak, vulnerable, absurd. He cursed bitterly under his breath.

It seemed now that he had loved Ardee with an unbearable passion. That they had shared something he would never find again. How could he not have realised it at the time? How could he have allowed it all to fall apart, for this? The sad fact was, he supposed, that love on its own was nothing like enough.

Logen felt a lurch of disappointment as he opened the door, and close behind it an ugly wave of anger. The room was empty, neat and clean, as though no one had ever slept there. Ferro was gone.

Nothing had worked out the way he'd hoped. He should've expected it by now, maybe. After all, things never had before. And yet he kept on pissing into the wind. He was like a man whose door's too low, but instead of working out how to duck, keeps on smacking his head into the lintel every day of his miserable life. He wanted to feel sorry for himself, but he knew he deserved no better. A man can't do the things he'd done, and hope for happy endings.

He strode out into the corridor and down the hallway, his jaw clenched. He shouldered open the next door without knocking. The tall windows stood open, sunlight pouring into the airy room, hangings stirring in the breeze. Bayaz sat in a carved chair in front of one of them, a teacup in his hand. A fawning servant in a velvet jacket was pouring into it from a silver pot, a tray and cups balanced on his outspread fingertips.

'Ah, the King of the Northmen!' called Bayaz. 'How are—'

'Where is Ferro?'

'Gone. She left something of a mess behind, in fact, but I have tidied up, as I so often find myself—'

'Where?'

The Magus shrugged. 'South, I would imagine. Vengeance, or some such, if I was forced to guess. She always said a very great deal about vengeance. A most ill-tempered woman.'

'She is changed.'

'Great events, my friend. None of us are quite the same. Now, will you take tea?'

The servant pranced forward, silver tray bobbing. Logen seized him by his velvet jacket and flung him across the room. He squealed as he crashed into the wall and sprawled on the carpet, cups clattering around him.

Bayaz raised an eyebrow. 'A simple "no" would have sufficed.'

'Shit on that, you old bastard.'

The First of the Magi frowned. 'Why, Master Ninefingers, you seem in bullish mood this morning. You are a king now, and it ill becomes you to let your baser passions rule you in this manner. Kings of that sort never last. You have enemies still in the North. Calder and Scale, up in the hills causing trouble, I am sure. Manners should be repaid by like manners, I have always thought. You have been helpful to me, and I can be helpful in return.'

'As you were to Bethod?'

'Just so.'

‘Much good it did him.’

‘When he had my help, he prospered. Then he became proud, and unruly, and demanded things all his own way. Without my help . . . well, you know the rest.’

‘Stay out of my business, wizard.’ Logen let his hand fall onto the hilt of the Maker’s blade. If swords have voices, as the Magus had once told him, he made it give a grim threat now.

But Bayaz’ face showed only the slightest trace of annoyance. ‘A lesser man might find himself upset. Did I not buy your life from Bethod? Did I not give you purpose when you had nothing? Did I not take you to the very edge of the World, show you wonders few men have seen? These are poor manners. Why, the very sword with which you threaten me was my gift to you. I had hoped we might come to a—’

‘No.’

‘I see. Not even—’

‘We are done. Looks as if I’ll never be a better man, but I can try not to be a worse. I can try that much, at least.’

Bayaz narrowed his eyes. ‘Well, Master Ninefingers, you surprise me to the last. I thought you a courageous yet restrained man, a calculating yet compassionate one. I thought you, above all, a realistic man. But the Northmen have ever been prone to petulance. I observe in you now an obstinate streak and a destructive temper. I see the Bloody-Nine at last.’

‘I’m happy to disappoint you. Seems we misjudged each other entirely. I took you for a great man. Now I realise my mistake.’ Logen slowly shook his head. ‘What have you done here?’

‘What have I done?’ Bayaz snorted with disbelieving laughter. ‘I combined three pure disciplines of magic, and I forged a new one! It seems you do not understand the achievement, Master Ninefingers, but I forgive you. I realise that book-learning has never been your strongest suit. Such a thing has not been contemplated since before the Old Time, when Euz split his gifts among his sons.’ Bayaz sighed. ‘None will appreciate my greatest achievement, it seems. None except Khalul, perhaps, and it is unlikely he will ever proffer his congratulations. Why, such power has not been released within the Circle of the World since . . . since . . .’

‘Glustrod destroyed himself and Aulcus with him?’

The Magus raised his eyebrows. ‘Since you mention it.’

‘And the results are pretty much the same, it seems to me, except you wrought a touch less careless slaughter, and ruined a smaller part of a smaller city, in a smaller, meaner time. Otherwise what’s the difference, between you and him?’

‘I would have thought that was entirely obvious.’ Bayaz lifted his teacup, gazing mildly over the rim. ‘Glustrod lost.’

Logen stood there for a long while, thinking on that. Then he turned and stalked from the room, the servant cringing out of his way. Into the corridor, footsteps clapping from the gilded ceiling, Bethod’s heavy chain jingling round his shoulders like laughter in his ear.

He probably should’ve kept the ruthless old bastard on his side. Chances were that Logen would need his help, the way things were like to be in the

North, once he got back. He probably should've sucked up that stinking piss he called tea and smiled as if it was honey. He probably should've laughed, and called Bayaz old friend, so he could come crawling to the Great Northern Library when things turned sour. That would have been the clever thing to do. That would have been the realistic thing. But it was just the way that Logen's father had always said . . .

He'd never been that realistic.

Behind the Throne

As soon as he heard the door open, Jezal knew who his visitor must be. He did not even have to look up. Who else would have the temerity to barge into a king's own chambers without so much as knocking? He cursed, silently, but with great bitterness.

It could only be Bayaz. His jailer. His chief tormentor. His ever-present shadow. The man who had destroyed half the Agriont, and made a ruin of beautiful Adua, and now smiled and revelled in the applause as though he were the saviour of the nation. It was enough to make a man sick to the pit of his guts. Jezal ground his teeth, staring out of the window towards the ruins, refusing to turn round.

More demands. More compromises. More talk of what had to be done. Being the head of state, at least with the First of the Magi at his shoulder, was an endlessly frustrating and disempowering experience. Getting his own way on even the tiniest of issues, an almost impossible struggle. Wherever he looked he found himself staring directly into the Magus' disapproving frown. He felt like nothing more than a figurehead. A fine-looking, a gilded, a magnificent yet utterly useless chunk of wood. Except a figurehead at least gets to go at the front of the ship.

'Your Majesty,' came the old man's voice, the usual thin veneer of respect scarcely concealing the hard body of disdain beneath.

'What now?' Jezal finally turned to face him. He was surprised to see that the Magus had shed his robes of state in favour of his old travel-stained coat, the heavy boots he had worn on their ill-fated journey into the ruined west. 'Going somewhere?' asked Jezal, hardly daring even to hope.

'I am leaving Adua. Today.'

'Today?' It was the most Jezal could do to stop himself leaping in the air and screaming for joy. He felt like a prisoner stepping from his stinking dungeon and into the bright sunlight of freedom. Now he could rebuild the Agriont as he saw fit. He could reorganise the Closed Council, pick his own advisers. Perhaps even rid himself of that witch of a wife Bayaz had saddled him with. He would be free to do the right thing, whatever that was. He would be free to try and find out what the right thing might be, at least. Was he not the High King of the Union, after all? Who would refuse him? 'We will be sorry to lose you, of course.'

'I can imagine. There are some arrangements that we must make first, however.'

'By all means.' Anything if it meant he was rid of the old bastard.

'I have spoken with your new Arch Lector, Gloкта.'

The name alone produced a shiver of revulsion. 'Have you indeed?'

'A sharp man. He has greatly impressed me. I have asked him to speak in my stead while I am absent from the Closed Council.'

'Truly?' asked Jezal, wondering whether to toss the cripple from his post directly after the Magus left the gates or to leave it a day.

'I would recommend,' said in very much the tone of an order, 'that you listen closely to his opinions.'

'Oh I will, of course. The best of luck on your journey back to . . .'

'I would like you, in fact, to do as he says.'

A cold knot of anger pressed at Jezal's throat. 'You would have me, in effect . . . obey him?'

Bayaz' eyes did not deviate from his own. 'In effect . . . yes.'

Jezal was left momentarily speechless. For the Magus to suppose that he could come and go as he pleased, leaving his maimed lackey in charge? Above a king, in his own kingdom? The overwhelming arrogance of the man! 'You have taken a high hand of late in my affairs!' he snapped. 'I am in no mind to trade one overbearing adviser for another.'

'That man will be very useful to you. To us. Decisions will have to be made that you would find difficult. Actions will have to be taken which you would rather not take yourself. People who would live in sparkling palaces need others willing to carry away their ordure, lest it pile up in the polished corridors and one day bury them. All this is simple, and obvious. You have not attended to me.'

'No! You are the one who has failed to attend! Sand dan Glokta? That crippled bastard . . .' he realised his unfortunate choice of words, but had to forge on regardless, growing angrier than ever, 'sitting beside me at the Closed Council? Leering over my shoulder every day of my life? And now you would have him dictate to me? Unacceptable. Insufferable. Impossible! We are no longer in the time of Harod the Great! I have no notion of what causes you to suppose that you could speak to me in such a manner. I am king here, and I refuse to be steered!'

Bayaz closed his eyes, and drew a slow breath threw his nose. Quite as though he were trying to find the patience for the education of a moron. 'You cannot understand what it is to live as long as I have. To know all that I know. You people are dead in the blink of an eye, and have to be taught the same old lessons all over again. The same lessons that Juvens taught Stolicus a thousand years ago. It becomes extremely tiresome.'

Jezal's fury was steadily building. 'I apologise if I bore you!'

'I accept your apology.'

'I was joking!'

'Ah. Your wit is so very sharp I hardly noticed I was cut.'

'You mock me!'

'It is easily done. Every man seems a child to me. When you reach my age you see that history moves in circles. So many times I have guided this nation back from the brink of destruction, and on to ever greater glory. And what do I ask in return? A few little sacrifices? If you only understood the sacrifices that I have made on behalf of you cattle!'

Jezal stabbed one finger furiously towards the window. 'And what of all those dead? What of all those who have lost everything? Those cattle, as you put it! Are they happy with their sacrifices, do you suppose? What of all those who have suffered from this illness? That still suffer? My own close friend

among them! I cannot but notice it seems similar to that illness you described to us in ruined Aulcus. I cannot help thinking that your magic might be the cause!’

The Magus made no effort to deny it. ‘I deal in the momentous. I cannot concern myself with the fate of every peasant. Neither can you. I have tried to teach you this, but it seems you have failed to learn the lesson.’

‘You are mistaken! I refuse to learn it!’ Now was his chance. Now, while he was angry enough, for Jezal to step forever from the shadow of the First of the Magi and stand a free man. Bayaz was poison, and he had to be cut out. ‘You helped me to my throne, and for that I thank you. But I do not care for your brand of government, it smacks of tyranny!’

Bayaz narrowed his eyes. ‘Government is tyranny. At its best it is dressed in pretty colours.’

‘Your callous disregard for the lives of my subjects! I will not stand for it! I have moved beyond you. You are no longer wanted here. No longer needed. I will find my own way from now on.’ He waved Bayaz away with what he hoped was a regal gesture of dismissal. ‘You may leave.’

‘May . . . I . . . indeed?’ The First of the Magi stood in silence for a long time, his frown growing darker and darker. Long enough for Jezal’s rage to begin to wilt, for his mouth to go dry, for his knees to feel weak. ‘I perceive that I have been far too soft with you,’ said Bayaz, each word sharp as a razor-cut. ‘I have coddled you, like a favourite grandchild, and you have grown wilful. A mistake that I shall not make again. A responsible guardian should never be shy with the whip.’

‘I am a son of kings!’ snarled Jezal, ‘I will not—’

He was doubled over by a spear of pain through his guts, stunningly sudden. He tottered a step or two, scalding vomit spraying from his mouth. He crashed onto his face, scarcely able even to breathe, his crown bouncing off and rolling away into the corner of the room. He had never known agony like it. Not a fraction of it.

‘I have no notion . . . of what causes you to suppose . . . that you could speak to me in such a manner. To me, the First of the Magi!’ Jezal heard Bayaz’ footsteps thumping slowly towards him, voice picking at his ears as he squirmed helplessly in his own sick.

‘Son of kings? I am disappointed, after all that we have been through together, that you would so readily believe the lies I have spread on your behalf. That nonsense was meant for the idiots in the streets, but it seems that idiots in palaces are lulled by sweet slop just as easily. I bought you from a whore. You cost me six marks. She wanted twenty, but I drive a hard bargain.’

The words were painful, of course. But far, far worse was the unbearable stabbing that cut up Jezal’s spine, that tore at his eyes, burned his skin, seared the very roots of his hair and made him thrash like a frog in boiling water.

‘I had others waiting, of course. I know better than to trust all to one throw of the dice. Other sons of mysterious parentage, ready to step into the role. There was a family called Brint, as I recall, and plenty more besides. But you floated to the top, Jezal, like a turd in the bath. When I crossed that bridge into the Agriont and saw you grown, I knew you were the one. You simply looked right, and you can’t teach that. You have even come to speak like a

king, which is a bonus I never expected.'

Jezal moaned and slobbered, unable even to scream. He felt Bayaz' boot slide under him and kick him over onto his back. The Magus' scowling face loomed down towards him, blurred by tears.

'But if you insist on being difficult . . . if you insist on going your own way . . . well, there are other options. Even kings die unexplained deaths. Thrown by a horse. Choked on an olive-pit. Long falls to the hard, hard cobble-stones. Or simply found dead in the morning. Life is always short for you insects. But it can be very short for those who are not useful. I made you out of nothing. Out of air. With a word I can unmake you.' Bayaz snapped his fingers, and the sound was like a sword through Jezal's stomach. 'Like that you can be replaced.'

The First of the Magi leaned down further. 'Now, dolt, bastard, son of a whore, consider carefully your answers to these questions. You will do as your Arch Lector advises, yes?'

The cramps relaxed a merciful fraction. Enough for Jezal to whisper, 'yes.'

'You will be guided by him in all things?'

'Yes.'

'You will abide by his orders, in public and in private?'

'Yes,' he gasped, 'yes.'

'Good,' said the Magus, straightening up, towering over Jezal as his statue had once towered over the people on the Kingsway. 'I knew that you would say so, because although I know that you are arrogant, ignorant, and ungrateful, I know this also . . . you are a coward. Remember that. I trust that this is one lesson you will not ignore.' The agony ebbed suddenly away. Enough for Jezal to lift his spinning head from the tiles.

'I hate you,' he managed to croak.

Bayaz spluttered with laughter. 'Hate me? The arrogance of you! To suppose that I might care. I, Bayaz, first apprentice of great Juvenis! I, who threw down the Master Maker, who forged the Union, who destroyed the Hundred Words!' The Magus slowly lifted his foot and planted it on the side of Jezal's jaw. 'I don't care whether you like me, fool.' He ground Jezal's face into the vomit-spattered floor with his boot. 'I care that you obey. And you will. Yes?'

'Yes,' Jezal slobbered through his squashed mouth.

'Then, your Majesty, I take my leave. Pray that you never give me cause to return.' The crushing pressure on his face released and Jezal heard the Magus' footsteps tap away to the far side of the room. The door creaked open, and then clicked firmly shut.

He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, his breath heaving quickly in and out. After a while he drew up the courage to roll over, dragged himself dizzily up to his hands and knees. There was an unpleasant stink, and not just from the vomit smeared across his face. He realised with a meagre flicker of shame that he had soiled himself. He crawled across to the window, still limp as a wrung-out rag, drew himself gasping up to his knees, and looked down into the chilly gardens.

It only took a moment for Bayaz to come into view, striding down the gravel path between the neat lawns, the back of his bald pate shining. Yoru Sulfur walked behind him, staff in one hand, a box of dark metal held under

the other arm. The same box that had followed Jezal, and Logen, and Ferro in a cart across half the Circle of the World. What happy days those seemed now.

Bayaz stopped, suddenly, turned, raised his head. He looked up, straight towards the window.

Jezal pressed himself into the hangings with a whimper of terror, his whole body trembling, the after-image of that unbearable pain still stamped, cold as ice, into his guts. The First of the Magi stood there for a moment longer, the faintest hint of a smile on his face. Then he turned away smartly, strode between the bowing Knights of the Body flanking the gate, and was gone.

Jezal knelt there, clinging to the curtains like a child to his mother. He thought about how happy he had once been, and how little he had realised it. Playing cards, surrounded by friends, a bright future ahead of him. He dragged in a heavy breath, the tightness of tears creeping up his throat, spreading out around his eyes. Never in his life had he felt so alone. Son of Kings? He had no one and nothing. He spluttered and sniffed. His vision grew blurry. He shook with hopeless sobs, his scarred lip trembling, the tears dripping down and spattering on the tiles.

He wept with pain and fear, with shame and anger, with disappointment and helplessness. But Bayaz had been right. He was a coward. So most of all he wept with relief.

Good Men, Evil Men

Grey morning time, out in the cold, wet gardens, and the Dogman was just stood there, thinking about how things used to be better. Stood there, in the middle of that circle of brown graves, staring at the turned earth over Harding Grim. Strange, how a man who said so little could leave such a hole.

It was a long journey that Dogman had taken, the last few years, and a strange one. From nowhere to nowhere, and he'd lost a lot of friends along the way. He remembered all those men gone back to the mud. Harding Grim. Tul Duru Thunderhead. Rudd Threetrees. Forley the Weakest. And what for? Who was better off because of it? All that waste. It was enough to make a man sick to the soles of his boots. Even one who was famous for having a flat temper. All gone, and left Dogman lonely. The world was a narrower place without 'em.

He heard footsteps through the wet grass. Logen, walking up through the misty rain, breath smoking round his scarred face. Dogman remembered how happy he'd been, that night, when Logen had stepped into the firelight, still alive. It had seemed like a new beginning, then. A good moment, promising better times. Hadn't quite worked out that way. Strange, how the Dogman didn't feel so happy at the sight of Logen Ninefingers no more.

'The King o' the Northmen,' he muttered. 'The Bloody-Nine. How's the day?'

'Wet is how it is. Getting late in the year.'

'Aye. Another winter coming.' Dogman picked at the hard skin on his palm. 'They come quicker and quicker.'

'Reckon it's high time I got back to the North, eh? Calder and Scale still loose, making mischief, and the dead know what type o' trouble Dow's cooked up.'

'Aye, I daresay. High time we left.'

'I want you to stay.'

Dogman looked up. 'Eh?'

'Someone needs to talk to the Southerners, make a deal. You've always been the best man I knew for talking. Other than Bethod, maybe, but . . . he ain't an option now, is he?'

'What sort of a deal?'

'Might be we'll need their help. There'll be all kind o' folk in the North not too keen about the way things have gone. Folk don't want a king, or don't want this one, leastways. The Union on our side'll be a help. Wouldn't hurt if you brought some weapons back with you too, when you come.'

Dogman winced. 'Weapons, is it?'

'Better to have 'em and not want 'em, than to need 'em but—'

'I know the rest. What happened to one more fight, then we're done? What happened to making things grow?'

'They might have to grow without us, for now. Listen, Dogman, I never

looked for a fight, you know that, but you have to be—'

'Don't. Even. Bother.'

'I'm trying to be a better man, here, Dogman.'

'That so? I don't see you trying that hard. Did you kill Tul?'

Logen's eyes went narrow. 'Dow been talking, has he?'

'Never mind who said what. Did you kill the Thunderhead or did you not? Ain't a hard one to come at. It's just a yes or a no.'

Logen made a kind of snort, like he was about to start laughing, or about to start crying, but didn't do either one. 'I don't know what I did.'

'Don't know? What use is don't know? Is that what you'll say after you've stabbed me through the back, while I'm trying to save your worthless life?'

Logen winced down at the wet grass. 'Maybe it will be. I don't know.' His eyes slid back up to the Dogman's, and stuck there, hard. 'But that's the price, ain't it? You know what I am. You could have picked a different man to follow.'

Dogman watched him go, not knowing what to say, not knowing what to think even. Just standing there, in the midst of the graves, getting wetter. He felt someone come up beside him. Red Hat, looking off into the rain, watching after Logen's black shape growing fainter and fainter. He shook his head, mouth pursed up tight.

'I never believed the stories they told about him. About the Bloody-Nine. All bluster, I thought. But I believe 'em now. I heard he killed Crummock's boy, in that fight in the mountains. Carved him careless as you'd crush a beetle, no reason. That's a man there cares for nothing. No man worse, I reckon, ever, in all the North. Not even Bethod. That's an evil bastard, if ever there was one.'

'That so?' Dogman found he was right up in Red Hat's face, and shouting. 'Well piss on you, asshole! Who made you the fucking judge?'

'Just saying, is all.' Red Hat stared at him. 'I mean . . . I thought we had the same thing in mind.'

'Well, we don't! You need a mind bigger'n a pea to hold something in it and you're lacking the equipment, idiot! You wouldn't know a good man from an evil if he pissed on you!'

Red Hat blinked. 'Right y'are. I see I got the wrong notion.' He backed off a stride, then walked away through the drizzle, shaking his head.

Dogman watched him go, teeth gritted, thinking how he wanted to hit someone, but not sure who. There was no one here but him, now, anyway. Him and the dead. But maybe that's what happens once the fighting stops, to a man who knows nothing but fighting. He fights himself.

He took a long breath of the cold, wet air, and he frowned down at the earth over Grim's grave. He wondered if he'd know a good man from an evil, any more. He wondered what the difference was.

Grey morning time, out in the cold, wet gardens, and the Dogman was just stood there, thinking about how things used to be better.

Not What You Wanted

Glokta woke to a shaft of soft sunlight spilling through the hangings and across his wrinkled bed-clothes, full of dancing dust-motes. He tried to turn over, winced at a click in his neck. *Ah, the first spasm of the day.* The second was not long coming. It flashed through his left hip as he wrestled his way onto his back and snatched his breath away. The pain crept down his spine, settled in his leg, and stayed there.

‘Ah,’ he grunted. He tried, ever so gently, to turn his ankle round, to work his knee. The pain instantly grew far worse. ‘Barnam!’ He dragged the sheet to one side and the familiar stink of ordure rose up to his nostrils. *Nothing like the stench of your own dung to usher in a productive morning.*

‘Ah! Barnam!’ He whimpered, and slobbered, and clutched at his withered thigh, but nothing helped. The pain grew worse, and worse. The fibres started from his wasted flesh like metal cables, toeless foot flopping grotesquely on the end, entirely beyond his control.

‘Barnam!’ he screamed. ‘Barnam, you fucker! The door!’ Spit dribbled from his toothless mouth, tears ran down his twitching face, his hands clawed, clutching up Fistfuls of brown-stained sheet.

He heard hurried footsteps in the corridor, the lock scraping. ‘Locked you fool!’ he squealed through his gums, thrashing with pain and anger. The knob turned and the door opened, much to his surprise. *What the . . .*

Ardee hurried over to the bed. ‘Get out!’ he hissed, holding one arm pointlessly over his face, clutching at his bedclothes with the other. ‘Get out!’

‘No.’ She tore the sheet away and Glokta grimaced, waiting for her face to go pale, waiting for her to stagger back, one hand across her mouth, eyes wide with shock and disgust. *I am married . . . to this shit-daubed monstrosity?* She only frowned down, for a moment, then took hold of his ruined thigh and pressed her thumbs into it.

He gasped and flailed and tried to twist away but her grip was merciless, two points of agony stabbing right into the midst of his cramping sinews. ‘Ah! You fucking . . . you . . .’ The wasted muscle went suddenly soft, and he went soft with it, dropping back against the mattress. *And now being splattered with my own shit begins to seem just the slightest bit embarrassing.*

He lay there for a moment, helpless. ‘I didn’t want you to see me . . . like this.’

‘Too late. You married me, remember. We’re one body, now.’

‘I think I got the better part of that deal.’

‘I got my life, didn’t I?’

‘Hardly the kind of life that most young women hanker for.’ He watched her, the strip of sunlight wandering back and forth across her darkened face as she moved. ‘I know that I’m not what you wanted . . . in a husband.’

‘I always dreamed of a man I could dance with.’ She looked up and held his

eye. 'But I think, perhaps, that you suit me better. Dreams are for children. We both are grownups.'

'Still. You see now that not dancing is the least of it. You should not have to do . . . this.'

'I want to do it.' She took a firm grip on his face and twisted it, somewhat painfully, so he was looking straight into hers. 'I want to do something. I want to be useful. I want someone to need me. Can you understand that?'

Glokta swallowed. 'Yes.' *Few better.* 'Where's Barnam?'

'I told him he could have the mornings off. I told him I'd be doing this from now on. I've told him to move my bed in here, as well.'

'But—'

'Are you telling me I can't sleep in the same room as my husband?' Her hands slid slowly over his withered flesh, gentle, but firm, rubbing at the scarred skin, pressing at the ruined muscles. *How long ago? Since a woman looked at me with anything but horror? Since a woman touched me with anything but violence?* He lay back, his eyes closed and his mouth open, tears running from his eye and trickling down the sides of his head into the pillow. *Almost comfortable. Almost . . .*

'I don't deserve this,' he breathed.

'No one gets what they deserve.'

Queen Terez looked down her nose at Glokta as he lurched into her sunny salon, without the slightest attempt to hide her utter disgust and contempt. *As though she saw a cockroach crawling into her regal presence. But we will see. We know well the path, after all. We have followed it ourselves, and we have dragged so many others after. Pride comes first. Then pain. Humility follows hard upon it. Obedience lies just beyond.*

'My name is Glokta. I am the new Arch Lector of his Majesty's Inquisition.'

'Ah, the cripple,' she sneered. *With refreshing directness.* 'And why do you disrupt my afternoon? You will find no criminals here.' Only Styrian witches.

Glokta's eyes flickered to the other woman, standing bolt upright near one of the windows. 'It is a matter we had better discuss alone.'

'The Countess Shalere has been my friend since birth. There is nothing you can say to me that she cannot hear.' The Countess glared at Glokta with a disdainful little less piercing than the queen's.

'Very well.' *No delicate way to say it. I doubt that delicacy will serve us here in any case.* 'It has come to my attention, your Majesty, that you have not been performing your duties as a wife.'

Terez' long, thin neck seemed to stretch with indignation. 'How dare you? That is none of your concern!'

'I am afraid that it is. Heirs for the king, you see. The future of the state, and so forth.'

'This is insufferable!' The queen's face was white with fury. *The Jewel of Talins flashes fire indeed.* 'I must eat your repulsive food, I must tolerate your dreadful weather, I must smile at the rambling mutterings of your idiot king! Now I must answer to his grotesque underlings? I am kept prisoner here!'

Glokta looked round at the beautiful room. The opulent hangings, the gilt furnishings, the fine paintings. The two beautiful women in their beautiful clothes. He dug one tooth sourly into the underside of his tongue. 'Believe me. This is not what a prison looks like.'

'There are many kinds of prison!'

'I have learned to live with worse, and so have others.' *You should see what my wife has to put up with.*

'To share my bed with some disgusting bastard, some scarred son of who knows what, to have some stinking, hairy man pawing at me in the night!' The queen gave a shiver of revulsion. 'It is not to be borne!'

Tears shone in her eyes. Her lady-in-waiting rushed forward, dress rustling, and knelt beside her, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. Terez reached up, pressed her own hand on top of it. The queen's companion stared at Glokta with naked hatred. 'Get out! Out, cripple, and never come back! You have upset her Majesty!'

'I have a gift for it,' muttered Glokta. 'One reason why I am so widely hated . . .' He trailed off, frowning. He stared at their two hands on Terez' shoulder. There was something in that touch. *Comforting, soothing, protective. The touch of the committed friend, the trusted confidante, the sisterly companion. But there is more than that. Too familiar. Too warm. Almost like the touch of . . . Ah.*

'You don't have much use for men, do you?'

The two women looked up at him together, then Shalere snatched her hand away from the queen's shoulder. 'I will have your meaning!' barked Terez, but her voice was shrill, almost panicked.

'I think you know my meaning well enough.' *And my task is made a great deal easier.* 'Some help here!' Two hulking Practicals barged through the doors. *And as quickly as that, everything is changed. Amazing, the spice that two big men can add to a conversation. Some kinds of power are only tricks of the mind. I learned that well, in the Emperor's prisons, and my new master has only reinforced the lesson.*

'You would not dare!' shrieked Terez, staring at the masked arrivals with wide eyes. 'You would not dare to touch me!'

'As luck would have it, I doubt it will be necessary, but we will see.' He pointed at the Countess. 'Seize that woman.'

The two black-masked men tramped across the thick carpet. One moved a chair out of his way with exaggerated care.

'No!' The queen sprang up, grabbing Shalere's hand in hers. 'No!'

'Yes,' said Glokta.

The two women backed away, clinging to each other, Terez in front, shielding the Countess with her body, teeth bared in a warning snarl as the two great shadows approached. *One might almost be touched by their evident care for one another, if one was capable of being touched at all.* 'Take her. But no marks on the queen, if you please.'

'No!' screamed Terez. 'I'll have your heads for this! My father . . . my father is—'

'On his way back to Talins, and I doubt he'll be starting a war over your friend since birth, in any case. You are bought and paid for, and Duke Orso does not strike me as the type to renege on a deal.'

The two men and the two women lurched around the far end of the room in an ungainly dance. One of the Practicals seized the Countess by one wrist, dragged her away from the queen's clutching hand and forced her down onto her knees, twisting her arms behind her, snapping heavy irons shut on her wrists. Terez shrieked, punched, kicked, clawed at the other, but she might as well have vented her fury on a tree. The huge man barely moved, his eyes every bit as emotionless as the mask below them.

Glokta found that he was almost smiling as he watched the ugly scene. *I may be crippled, and hideous, and in constant pain, but the humiliation of beautiful women is one pleasure I can still enjoy. I do it now with threats and violence, instead of with soft words and entreaties, but still. Almost as much fun as it ever was.*

One of the Practicals forced a canvas bag over Shalere's head, turning her cries to muffled sobs, then marched her helplessly across the room. The other stayed where he was for a moment, keeping the queen herded into the corner. Then he backed off towards the door. On his way he picked up the chair he had moved and carefully put it back exactly as he had found it.

'Curse you!' Terez screamed, her clenched fists trembling as the door clicked shut and left the two of them alone. 'Curse you, you twisted bastard! If you harm her—'

'It will not come to that. Because you have the means of her deliverance well within your grasp.'

The queen swallowed, chest heaving. 'What must I do?'

'Fuck.' The word somehow sounded twice as ugly in the beautiful surroundings. 'And bear children. I will give the Countess seven days in the darkness, unmolested. If, at the end of that time, I do not hear that you have set the king's cock on fire every night, I will introduce her to my Practicals. Poor fellows. They get so little exercise. Ten minutes each should do the trick, but there are plenty of them, in the House of Questions. I daresay we can keep your childhood friend quite busy night and day.'

A spasm of horror passed over Terez' face. *And why not? This is a low chapter even for me.* 'If I do as you ask?'

'Then the Countess will be kept quite safe and sound. Once you are verifiably with child, I will return her to you. Things can be as they are now, during the period of your confinement. Two boys, as heirs, two girls, to marry off, and we can be done with one another. The king can find his entertainment elsewhere.'

'But, that will take years!'

'You could get it done in three or four, if you really ride him hard. And you might find it makes everyone's lives easier if you at least pretend to enjoy it.'

'Pretend?' she breathed.

'The more you seem to like it, the quicker it will be over. The cheapest whore on the docks can squeal for her coppers when the sailors stick her. Are you telling me you cannot squeal for the king of the Union? You offend my patriotic sensibilities! Uh!' he gasped, rolling his eyes in a parody of ecstasy. 'Ah! Yes! Just there! Don't stop!' He curled his lip at her. 'You see? Even I can do it! A liar of your experience should have no difficulty.'

Her teary eyes darted round the room, as though she were looking for some

way out. *But there is none. The noble Arch Lector Glokta, protector of the Union, great heart of the Closed Council, paragon of the gentlemanly virtues, displays his flair for politics and diplomacy.* He felt some tiny stirring within him as he watched her wretched desperation, some negligible flutter in his guts. *Guilt, perhaps? Or indigestion? It hardly matters which, I have learned my lesson. Pity never works for me.*

He took one more slow step forward. 'Your Majesty, I hope you fully understand the alternative.'

She nodded, and wiped her eyes. Then she proudly raised up her chin. 'I will do as you ask. Please, I beg of you, do not hurt her . . . please . . .'

Please, please, please. Many congratulations, your Eminence. 'You have my word. I will see the Countess has only the best of treatment.' He licked gently at the sour gaps in his teeth. 'And you will do the same with your husband.'

Jeza! sat in the darkness. He watched the fire dance in the great hearth, and he thought about what might have been. He thought about it with some bitterness. All the paths his life could have taken, and he had ended up here. Alone.

He heard hinges creaking. The small door that connected to the queen's bedchamber crept slowly open. He had never bothered to lock it, from his side. He had not foreseen any circumstance under which she would ever want to use it. Some error of etiquette that he had made, no doubt, for which she could not wait even until morning to admonish him.

He stood up, quickly, stupidly nervous.

Terez stepped through the shadowy doorway. She looked so different that at first he hardly recognised her. Her hair was loose, she wore only her shift. She looked humbly towards the ground, her face in darkness. Her bare feet padded across the boards, across the thick carpet towards the fire. She seemed very young, suddenly. Young and small, weak and alone. He watched her, mostly confused, somewhat scared, but also, as she came closer and the firelight caught the shape of her body, ever so slightly aroused.

'Terez, my . . .' he fumbled for the word. Darling scarcely seemed to cover it. Nor did love. Worst enemy might have, but it hardly would have helped matters. 'Can I—'

She cut him off, as ever, but not with the tirade he was expecting. 'I'm sorry for the way that I have treated you. For the things that I have said . . . you must think me . . .'

There were tears in her eyes. Actual tears. He would hardly have believed until that moment that she could cry. He took a hurried step or two towards her, one hand out, no idea of what to do. He had never dared to hope for an apology, and certainly not one so earnestly and honestly delivered.

'I know,' he stuttered, 'I know . . . I'm not what you wanted in a husband. I'm sorry for that. But I'm as much a prisoner in this as you are. I only hope . . . that perhaps we can make the best of it. Perhaps we might find a way . . . to care for one another? We have no one else, either of us. Please, tell me what I have to do—'

‘Shhhh.’ She touched one finger to his lips, looking into his eyes, one half of her face glowing orange from the fire, the other half black with shadow. Her fingers worked through his hair and drew him towards her. She kissed him, gently, awkwardly, almost, their lips brushing, then pressing clumsily together. He slid one hand round behind her neck, under her ear, his thumb stroking at her smooth cheek. Their mouths worked mechanically, accompanied by the soft squeak of breath in his nose, the gentle squelch of spit moving. Hardly the most passionate kiss he had ever enjoyed, but it was a great deal more than he had ever expected to get from her. There was a pleasant tingling building in his crotch as he pushed his tongue into her mouth.

He ran his other palm down her back, feeling the bumps of her spine under his fingers. He grunted softly as he slid his hand over her arse, down the side of her thigh then up between her legs, the hem of her shift gathering round his wrist. He felt her shudder, felt her flinch, and bite her lip in shock, it seemed, or even in disgust. He jerked his hand back, and they broke apart, both looking at the floor. ‘I’m sorry,’ he muttered, inwardly cursing his eagerness. ‘I —’

‘No. It’s my fault. I’m not . . . experienced . . . with men . . .’ Jezal blinked for a moment, then almost smiled at a surge of relief. Of course. Now everything was clear. She was so assured, so sharp, it had never even occurred to him that she might be a virgin. It was simple fear that made her tremble so. Fear of disappointing him. He felt a rush of sympathy.

‘Don’t worry,’ he murmured it softly, stepping forward and taking her in his arms. He felt her stiffen, no doubt with nervousness, and he gently stroked her hair. ‘I can wait . . . we don’t have to . . . not yet.’

‘No.’ She said it with a touching determination, looking him fearlessly in the eye. ‘No. We do.’

She dragged her shift up and over her head, let it drop to the floor. She came close to him, took hold of his wrist, guided it back to her thigh, then upwards.

‘Ah,’ she whispered, urgent and throaty, her lips brushing his cheek, her breath hot in his ear. ‘Yes . . . just there . . . don’t stop.’ She led him breathless to the bed.

‘If that is all?’ Gloкта looked around the table, but the old men were silent. *All waiting for my word.* The king was absent again, so he made them wait an unnecessarily long time. *Just to stab home to any doubters who is in charge. Why not, after all? The purpose of power is not to be gracious.* Then this meeting of the Closed Council is over.’

They rose, quickly, quietly, and in good order. Torlichorm, Halleck, Kroy and all the rest filed slowly from the room. Gloкта himself struggled up, his leg still aching with the memory of the morning’s cramps, only to find that the Lord Chamberlain had, once again, remained behind. *And he looks far from amused.*

Hoff waited until the door shut before he spoke. ‘Imagine my surprise,’ he

snapped, 'to hear of your recent marriage.'

'A swift and understated ceremony.' Glokta showed the Lord Chamberlain the wreckage of his front teeth. 'Young love, you understand, brooks no delays. I apologise if the lack of an invitation offended you.'

'An invitation?' growled Hoff, frowning mightily. 'Hardly! This is not what we discussed!'

'Discussed? I believe we have a misunderstanding. Our mutual friend,' and Glokta let his eyes move significantly to the empty thirteenth chair at the far end of the table, 'left me in charge. Me. No other. He deems it necessary that the Closed Council speak with one voice. From now on, that voice will sound remarkably like mine.'

Hoff's ruddy face had paled slightly. 'Of course, but—'

'You are aware, I suppose, that I lived through two years of torture? Two years in hell, so I can stand before you now. Or lean before you, twisted as an old tree root. A crippled, shambling, wretched mockery of a man, eh, Lord Hoff? Let us be honest with one another. Sometimes I lose control of my own leg. My own eyes. My own face.' He snorted. 'If you can call it a face. My bowels too, are rebellious. I often wake up daubed in my own shit. I find myself in constant pain, and the memories of everything that I have lost nag at me, endlessly.' He felt his left eye twitching. *Let it twitch.* 'So you can see how, despite my constant efforts to be a man of sunny temper, I find that I despise the world, and everything in it, and myself most of all. A regrettable state of affairs, for which there is no remedy.'

The Lord Chamberlain licked his lips uncertainly. 'You have my sympathy, but I fail to see the relevance.'

Glokta came suddenly very close, ignoring a spasm up his leg, pressing Hoff back against the table. 'Your sympathy is less than worthless, and the relevance is this. Knowing what I am, what I have endured, what I still endure . . . can you suppose there is anything in this world I fear? Any act I will shrink from? The most unbearable pain of others is at the worst . . . an irritation to me.' Glokta jerked even closer, letting his lips work back from his ruined teeth, letting his face tremble, and his eye weep. 'Knowing all that . . . can you possibly think it wise . . . for a man to stand where you stand now . . . and make threats? Threats against *my* wife? Against my unborn child?'

'No threat was intended, of course, I would never—'

'That simply would not do, Lord Hoff! That simply would not do. At the very slightest breath of violence against them . . . why, I would not wish you even to imagine the inhuman horror of my response.' Closer yet, so close that his spit made a soft mist across Hoff's trembling jowls. 'I cannot permit any further discussion of this issue. Ever. I cannot permit even the rumour that there might be an issue. Ever. It simply . . . would . . . not . . . do, Lord Hoff, for an eyeless, tongue-less, faceless, fingerless, cockless bag of meat to be occupying your chair on the Closed Council.' He stepped away, grinning his most revolting grin. 'Why, my Lord Chamberlain . . . who would drink all the wine?'

It was a beautiful autumn day in Adua, and the sun shone pleasantly through the branches of the fragrant fruit trees, casting a dappled shade onto the grass beneath. A pleasing breeze fluttered through the orchard, stirring the crimson mantle of the king as he strode regally around his lawn, and the white coat of his Arch Lector as he hobbled doggedly along at a respectful distance, stooped over his cane. Birds twittered from the trees, and his Majesty's highly polished boots crunched in the gravel and made faint, agreeable echoes against the white buildings of the palace.

From the other side of the high walls came the faint sound of distant work. The clanking of picks and hammers, the scraping of earth and the clattering of stone. The faint calls of the carpenters and the masons. These were the most pleasant sounds of all, to Jezal's ear. The sounds of rebuilding.

'It will take time, of course,' he was saying.

'Of course.'

'Years, perhaps. But much of the rubble is already cleared. The repair of some of the more lightly damaged buildings has already begun. The Agriont will be more glorious than ever before you know it. I have made it my highest priority.'

Glokta bowed his head even lower. 'And therefore mine, and that of your Closed Council. Might I enquire . . .' he murmured, 'after the health of your wife, the queen?'

Jezal worked his mouth. He hardly liked discussing his personal business with this man, of all people, but it could not be denied that whatever the cripple had said, there had been a most dramatic improvement.

'A material change.' Jezal shook his head. 'I find now that she is a woman of almost . . . insatiable appetites.'

'I am delighted that my entreaties have had an effect.'

'Oh, they have, they have, only there is still a certain . . .' Jezal waved his hand in the air, searching out the right word. 'Sadness in her. Sometimes . . . I hear her crying, in the night. She stands at the open window, and she weeps, for hours at a time.'

'Crying, your Majesty? Perhaps she is merely homesick. I always suspected she was a much gentler spirit than she appears to be.'

'She is! She is. A gentle spirit.' Jezal thought about it for a moment. 'Do you know, I think you may be right. Homesick.' A plan began to take shape in his mind. 'Perhaps we should have the gardens of the palace redesigned, to give a flavour of Talins? We could have the stream altered, in the likeness of canals, and so forth!'

Glokta leered his toothless grin. 'A sublime idea. I shall speak to the Royal Gardener. Perhaps another brief word with her Majesty as well, to see if I can staunch her tears.'

'I would appreciate whatever you can do. How is your own wife?' he tossed over his shoulder, hoping to change the subject, then realising he had strayed onto one even more difficult.

But Glokta only showed his empty smile again. 'She is a tremendous comfort to me, your Majesty. I really don't know how I ever managed without her.'

They moved on in awkward silence for a moment, then Jezal cleared his throat. 'I've been thinking, Glokta, about that scheme of mine. You know,

about a tax on the banks? Perhaps to pay for a new hospital near the docks. For those who cannot afford a surgeon. The common folk have been good to us. They have helped us to power, and suffered in our name. A government should offer something to all its people, should it not? The more mean, the more base, the more they need our help. A king is only truly as rich as his poorest subject, do you not think? Would you have the High Justice draw something up? Small to begin with, then we can go further. Free housing, perhaps, for those who find themselves without a home. We should consider —

‘Your Majesty, I have spoken to our mutual friend of this.’

Jezal stopped dead, a cold feeling creeping up his spine. ‘You have?’

‘I fear that I am obliged to.’ The cripple’s tone was that of a servant, but his sunken eyes did not stray from Jezal’s for a moment. ‘Our friend is . . . not enthusiastic.’

‘Does he rule the Union, or do I?’ But they both knew the answer to that question well enough.

‘You are king, of course.’

‘Of course.’

‘But our mutual friend . . . we would not wish to disappoint him.’ Glokta came a limping step closer, his left eye giving a repulsive flutter. ‘Neither one of us, I am sure, would want to encourage a visit to Adua . . . on his part.’

Jezal’s knees felt suddenly very weak. The faint memory of that awful, unbearable pain nagged at his stomach. ‘No,’ he croaked, ‘no, of course not.’

The cripple’s voice was only just above a whisper. ‘Perhaps, in time, funds could be found for some small project. Our friend cannot see everything, after all, and what he does not see will do no harm. I am sure between the two of us, quietly . . . we could do some little good. But not yet.’

‘No. You are right, Glokta. You have a fine sense for these things. Do nothing that would cause the least offence. Please inform our friend that his opinions will always be valued above all others. Please tell our good friend that he can rely on me. Will you tell him that, please?’

‘I will, your Majesty. He will be delighted to hear it.’

‘Good,’ murmured Jezal. ‘Good.’ A chilly breeze had blown up, and he turned back towards the palace, pulling his cloak around him. It was not, in the end, quite so pleasant a day as he had hoped it might be.

Loose Ends

A grubby white box with two doors facing each other. The ceiling was too low for comfort, the room too brightly lit by blazing lamps. Damp was creeping out of one corner and the plaster had erupted with flaking blisters, speckled with black mould. Someone had tried to scrub a long bloodstain from the wall, but hadn't tried nearly hard enough.

Two huge Practicals stood against the wall, their arms folded. One of the chairs at the bolted-down table was empty. Carlot dan Eider sat in the other. *History moves in circles, so they say. How things have changed. And yet, how they have stayed the same.* Her face was pale with worry, there were dark rings of sleeplessness around her eyes, but she still seemed beautiful. *More than ever, in a way. The beauty of the candle-flame that has almost burned out. Again.*

Glokta could hear her scared breathing as he settled himself in the remaining chair, leaned his cane against the scarred table-top, and frowned into her face. 'I am still wondering whether, in the next few days, I will receive that letter you spoke of. You know the one. The one you meant for Sult to read. The one that lays out the history of my self-indulgent little mercy to you. The one that you made sure will be sent to the Arch Lector . . . in the event of your death. Will it find its way onto my desk, now, do you suppose? A final irony.'

There was a pause. 'I realise that I made a grave mistake, when I came back.' *And an even worse one when you didn't leave fast enough.* 'I hope you will accept my apology. I only wanted to warn you about the Gurkish. If you can find it in your heart to be merciful—'

'Did you expect me to be merciful once?'

'No,' she whispered.

'Then what, do you suppose, are the chances of my making the same mistake twice? Never come back, I said. Not ever.' He waved with his hand and one of the monstrous Practicals stepped forward and lifted the lid of his case.

'No . . . no.' Her eyes darted over his instruments, and back. 'You won. You won, of course. I should have been grateful, the first time. Please.' She leaned forward, looking him in the eyes. Her voice dropped, grew husky, 'Please. Surely there must be . . . something that I can do . . . to make up for my foolishness . . .'

A peculiar mixture of feigned desire and genuine disgust. Fake longing and genuine loathing. And rendered still more distasteful by the edge of mounting terror. It makes me wonder why I was merciful in the first place.

Glokta snorted. 'Must this be embarrassing as well as painful?'

The effort at seduction leaked quickly away. But I note that the fear is going nowhere. It was joined now by a rising note of desperation. 'I know that I made a mistake . . . I was trying to help . . . please, I meant you no real harm .

. . I caused you no harm, you know it!' He reached out slowly towards the case, watched her horrified eyes follow his white-gloved hand, her voice rising to a squeal of panic. 'Only tell me what I can do! Please! I can help you! I can be useful! Tell me what I can do!'

Glokta's hand paused on its remorseless journey across the table. He tapped one finger against the wood. The finger on which the Arch Lector's ring glittered in the lamplight. 'Perhaps there is a way.'

'Anything,' she gurgled, teary eyes gleaming. 'Anything, only name it!'

'You have contacts in Talins?'

She swallowed. 'In Talins? Of . . . of course.'

'Good. I, and some colleagues of mine on the Closed Council, are concerned about the role that Grand Duke Orso means to play in Union politics. Our feeling – our very strong feeling – is that he should stick to bullying Styrians, and keep his nose out of our business.' He gave a significant pause.

'How do I—'

'You will go to Talins. You will be my eyes in the city. A traitor, fleeing for her life, friendless and alone, seeking only a place for a new beginning. A beautiful yet wretched traitor, in desperate need of a strong arm to protect her. You get the idea.'

'I suppose . . . I suppose that I could do that.'

Glokta snorted. 'You had better.'

'I will need money—'

'Your assets have been seized by the Inquisition.'

'Everything?'

'You may have noticed that there is a great deal of rebuilding to do. The king needs every mark he can lay his hands on, and confessed traitors can hardly expect to keep their chattels in such times as these. I have arranged passage for you. When you arrive, make contact with the banking house of Valint and Balk. They will arrange a loan to get you started.'

'Valint and Balk?' Eider looked even more scared than before, if that was possible. 'I would rather be in debt to anyone but them.'

'I know the feeling. But it's that or nothing.'

'How will I—'

'A woman of your resourcefulness? I am sure that you will find a way.' He winced as he pushed himself up from his chair. 'I want to be snowed in by your letters. What happens in the city. What Orso is about. Who he makes war with, who he makes peace with. Who are his allies and his enemies. You leave on the next tide.' He turned back, briefly, at the door. 'I'll be watching.'

She nodded dumbly, wiping away the tears of relief with the back of one trembling hand. *First it is done to us, then we do it to others, then we order it done. Such is the way of things.*

'Are you always drunk by this time in the morning?'

'Your Eminence, you wound me.' Nicomo Cosca grinned. 'Usually I have been drunk for hours by now.'

Huh. We each find our ways of getting through the day. 'I should thank you for

all your help.'

The Styrian gave a flamboyant wave of one hand. A hand, Glokta noticed, flashing with a fistful of heavy rings. 'To hell with your thanks, I have your money.'

'And I think every penny well spent. I hope that you will remain in the city, and enjoy Union hospitality for a while longer.'

'Do you know? I believe I will.' The mercenary scratched thoughtfully at the rash on his neck leaving red fingernail marks through the flaky skin. 'At least until the gold runs out.'

'How quickly can you possibly spend what I have paid you?'

'Oh, you would be amazed. I have wasted ten fortunes in my time and more besides. I look forward to wasting another.' Cosca slapped his hands down on his thighs, pushed himself up, strolled, somewhat unsteadily, to the door, and turned with a flourish. 'Make sure you call on me when you next have a desperate last stand organised.'

'My first letter will bear your name.'

'Then I bid you . . . farewell!' Cosca swept off his enormous hat and bowed low. Then, with a knowing grin, he stepped through the doorway, and was gone.

Glokta had moved the Arch Lector's office to a large hall on the ground floor of the House of Questions. *Closer to the real business of the Inquisition – the prisoners. Closer to the questions, and the answers. Closer to the truth. And, of course, the real clincher . . . no stairs.*

There were well-tended gardens outside the large windows. The faint sound of a fountain splashing beyond the glass. But inside the room there was none of the ugly paraphernalia of power. The walls were plastered and painted simple white. The furniture was hard and functional. *The whetstone of discomfort has kept me sharp this long. No reason to let the edge grow dull, simply because I have run out of enemies. New enemies will present themselves, before too long.*

There were some heavy bookcases of dark wood. Several leather-covered desks, already stacked high with documents requiring his attention. Aside from the great round table with its map of the Union and its pair of bloody nail-marks, there was only one item of Sult's furniture that Glokta had brought downstairs with him. The dark painting of bald old Zoller glowered down from above the simple fireplace. *Bearing an uncanny resemblance to a certain Magus I once knew. It is fitting, after all, that we maintain the proper perspective. Every man answers to somebody.*

There was a knocking at the door, and the head of Glokta's secretary appeared at the gap. 'The Lord Marshals have arrived, Arch Lector.'

'Show them in.'

Sometimes, when old friends meet, things are instantly as they were, all those years before. The friendship resumes, untouched, as though there had been no interruption. Sometimes, but not now. Collem West was scarcely recognisable. His hair had fallen out in ugly patches. His face was shrunk, had a yellow tinge about it. His uniform hung slack from his bony shoulders, stained around the collar. He shuffled into the room, bent over in an old man's stoop, leaning heavily on a stick. He looked like nothing so much as a walking

corpse.

Glokta had expected something of the kind, of course, from what Ardee had told him. But the sick shock of disappointment and horror he felt at the sight still caught him by surprise. *Like returning to the happy haunt of one's youth, and finding it all in ruins. Deaths. They happen every day. How many lives have I wrecked with my own hands? What makes this one so hard to take?* And yet it was. He found himself lurching up from his chair, starting painfully forwards as if to lend some help.

'Your Eminence.' West's voice was fragile and jagged as broken glass. He made a weak effort at a smile. 'Or I suppose . . . I should call you brother.'

'West . . . Collem . . . it is good to see you.' *Good, and awful both at once.*

A cluster of officers followed West into the room. *The wonderfully competent Lieutenant Jalenhorn I remember, of course, but a Major now. And Brint too, made a Captain by his friend's swift advancement. Marshal Kroy we know and love from the Closed Council. Congratulations, all, on your advancement.* Another man brought up the rear of the party. A lean man with a face horribly burned. *But we, of all people, should hardly hold a repulsive disfigurement against him.* Each one of them frowned nervously towards West, as though ready to pounce forward if he should slump to the floor. Instead he shuffled to the round table and sagged trembling into the nearest chair.

'I should have come to you,' said Glokta. *I should have come to you far sooner.*

West made another effort at a smile, even more bilious than the last. Several of his teeth were missing. 'Nonsense. I know how busy you are, now. And I am feeling much better today.'

'Good, good. That is . . . good. Is there anything that I can get you?' *What could possibly help? 'Anything at all.'*

West shook his head. 'I do not think so. These gentlemen you know, of course. Apart from Sergeant Pike.' The burned man nodded to him.

'A pleasure.' *To meet someone even more maimed than myself, always.*

'I hear . . . happy news, from my sister.'

Glokta winced, almost unable to meet his old friend's eye. 'I should have sought your permission, of course. I surely would have, had there been time.'

'I understand.' West's bright eyes were fixed on his. 'She has explained it all. It is some kind of comfort to know that she'll be well taken care of.'

'On that you can depend. I will see to it. She will never be hurt again.'

West's gaunt face twisted. 'Good. Good.' He rubbed gently at the side of his face. His fingernails were black, edged with dried blood, as though they were peeling from the flesh beneath. 'There's always a price to be paid, eh, Sand? For the things we do?'

Glokta felt his eye twitching. 'It would seem so.'

'I have lost some of my teeth.'

'I see that, and can sympathise. Soup, I find . . . ' *I find utterly disgusting.*

'I am . . . scarcely able to walk.'

'I sympathise with that also. Your cane will be your best friend.' *As it will soon be mine, I think.*

'I am a pitiable shell of what I was.'

'I truly feel your pain.' *Truly. Almost more keenly than my own.*

West slowly shook his withered head. 'How can you stand it?'

'One step at a time, my old friend. Steer clear of stairs where possible, and mirrors, always.'

'Wise advice.' West coughed. An echoing cough, from right down beneath his ribs. He swallowed noisily. 'I think my time is running out.'

'Surely not!' Glokta's hand reached out for a moment, as if to rest on West's shrunken shoulder, as if to offer comfort. He jerked it back, awkwardly. *It is not suited to the task.*

West licked at his empty gums. 'This is how most of us go, isn't it? No final charge. No moment of glory. We just . . . fall slowly apart.'

Glokta would have liked to say something optimistic. *But that rubbish comes from other mouths than mine. Younger, prettier mouths, with all their teeth, perhaps.* 'Those who die on the battlefield are in some ways the lucky few. Forever young. Forever glorious.'

West nodded, slowly. 'Here's to the lucky few, then . . .' His eyes rolled back, he swayed, then slumped sideways. Jalenhorm was the first forward, catching him before he hit the ground. He flopped in the big man's arms, a long string of thin vomit splattering against the floor.

'Back to the palace!' snapped Kroy. 'At once!'

Brint hurried to swing the doors open while Jalenhorm and Kroy steered West out of the room, draped between them with his arms over their shoulders. His limp shoes scraped against the floor, his piebald head lolling. Glokta watched them go, standing helpless, his toothless mouth half open, as if to speak. As if to wish his friend good luck, or good health, or a merry afternoon. *None of them seem quite to fit the circumstance, however.*

The doors clattered shut and Glokta was left staring at them. His eyelid flickered, he felt wet on his cheek. *Not tears of compassion, of course. Not tears of grief. I feel nothing, fear nothing, care for nothing. They cut away the parts of me that could weep in the Emperor's prisons. This can only be salt water, and nothing more. Merely a broken reflex in a mutilated face. Farewell, brother. Farewell, my only friend. And farewell to the ghost of beautiful Sand dan Glokta, too. Nothing of him remains. All for the best, of course. A man in my position can afford no indulgences.*

He took a sharp breath, and wiped his face with the back of his hand. He limped to his desk, sat, composed himself for a moment, assisted by a sudden twinge in his toeless foot. He turned his attention to his documents. *Papers of confession, tasks outstanding, all the tedious business of government—*

He looked up. A figure had detached itself from the shadows behind one of the high book-cases and now stepped out into the room, arms folded. The man with the burned face who had come in with the officers. In the excitement of their exit, it seemed that he had remained behind.

'Sergeant Pike, was it?' murmured Glokta, frowning.

'That's the name I've taken.'

'Taken?'

The scarred face twisted into a mockery of a smile. *One even more hideous than my own, if that's possible.* 'Not surprising, that you shouldn't recognise me. My first week, there was an accident in a forge. Accidents often happen, in Angland.' *Angland? That voice . . . something about that voice . . .* 'Still nothing?'

Perhaps if I come closer?’

He sprang across the room without warning. Glokta was still struggling up from his seat as the man dived across the desk. They tumbled to the floor together in a cloud of flying paper, Glokta underneath, the back of his skull cracking against the stone, his breath all driven out in a long, agonised wheeze.

He felt the brush of steel against his neck. Pike’s face was no more than a few inches from his, the mottled mass of burns picked out in particularly revolting detail.

‘How about now?’ he hissed. ‘Anything seem familiar?’

Glokta felt his left eye flickering as recognition washed over him like a wave of freezing water. *Changed, of course. Changed utterly and completely. And yet I know him.*

‘Rews,’ he breathed

‘None other.’ Rews bit off the words with grim satisfaction.

‘You survived.’ Glokta whispered it, first with amazement, then with mounting amusement. ‘You survived! You’re a far harder man than I gave you credit for! Far, far harder.’ He started to chuckle, tears running down the side of his cheek again.

‘Something funny?’

‘Everything! You have to appreciate the irony. I have overcome so many powerful enemies, and it’s Salem Rews with the knife at my neck! It’s always the blade you don’t see coming that cuts you deepest, eh?’

‘You’ll get no deeper cuts than this one.’

‘Then cut away, my man, I am ready.’ Glokta tipped his head back, stretched his neck out, pressing it up against the cold metal. ‘I’ve been ready for a long time.’

Rews’ fist worked around the grip of his knife. His burned face trembled, eyes narrowing to bright slits in their pink sockets. *Now.*

His mottled lips slid back from his teeth. The sinews in his neck stood out as he made ready to wield the blade. *Do it.*

Glokta’s breath hissed quickly in and out, his throat tingling with anticipation. *Now, at last . . . now . . .*

But Rews’ arm did not move.

‘And yet you hesitate,’ whispered Glokta through his empty gums. ‘Not out of mercy, of course, not out of weakness. They froze all that out of you, eh? In England? You pause because you realise, in all that time dreaming of killing me, you never thought of what would be next. What will you truly have gained, with all your endurance? With all your cunning and your effort? Will you be hunted? Will you be sent back? I can offer you so much more.’

Rews’ melted frown grew even harder. ‘What could you give me? After this?’

‘Oh, this is nothing. I suffer twice the pain and ten times the humiliation getting up in the morning. A man like you could be very useful to me. A man . . . as hard as you have proved yourself to be. A man who has lost everything, including all his scruples, all his mercy, all his fear. We both have lost everything. We both have survived. I understand you, Rews, as no one else ever can.’

‘Pike is my name, now.’

‘Of course it is. Let me up, Pike.’

Slowly the knife slid away from his throat. The man who had been Salem Rews stood over him, frowning down. *Who could ever anticipate the turns that fate can take?* ‘Up, then.’

‘Easier said than done.’ Glokta dragged in a few sharp breaths, then growling with a great and painful effort he rolled over onto all fours. *A heroic achievement indeed.* He slowly tested his limbs, wincing as his twisted joints clicked. *Nothing broken. No more broken than usual, anyway.* He reached out and took the handle of his fallen cane between two fingers, dragged it towards him through the scattered papers. He felt the point of the blade pressing into his back.

‘Don’t take me for a fool, Glokta. If you try anything—’

He clutched at the edge of the desk and dragged himself up. ‘You’ll cut my liver out and all the rest. Don’t worry. I am far too crippled to try anything worse than shit myself. I have something to show you, though. Something that I feel sure you will appreciate. If I’m wrong, well . . . you can slit my throat a little later.’

Glokta lurched out of the heavy door of his office, Pike sticking as close to his shoulder as a shadow, the knife kept carefully out of sight.

‘Stay,’ he snapped at the two Practicals in the ante-room, hobbling on past the frowning secretary at the huge desk. Out into the wide hallway running through the heart of the House of Questions and Glokta limped faster, cane clicking against the tiles. It hurt him to do it, but he held his head back, gave a cold wrinkle to his lip. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw the Clerks, the Practicals, the Inquisitors, bowing, sliding backwards, clearing away. *How they fear me. More than any man in Adua, and with good reason. How things have changed. And yet, how they have stayed the same.* His leg, his neck, his gums. These things were as they had always been. *And always will be. Unless I am tortured again, of course.*

‘You look well,’ Glokta tossed over his shoulder. ‘Aside from your hideous facial burns, of course. You lost weight.’

‘Starving can do that.’

‘Indeed, indeed. I lost a great deal of weight in Gurkhul. And not just from the pieces they cut out of me. This way.’

They turned through a heavy door flanked by frowning Practicals, past an open gate of iron bars. Into a long and windowless corridor, sloping steadily downwards, lit by too few lanterns and filled with slow shadows. The walls were rendered and whitewashed, though none too recently. There was a seedy feel to the place, and a smell of damp. *Just as there always is.* The clicking of Glokta’s cane, the hissing of his breath, the rustling of his white coat, all fell dead on the chill, wet air.

‘Killing me will bring you scant satisfaction, you know.’

‘We shall see.’

‘I doubt it. I was hardly the one responsible for your little trip northwards. I did the work perhaps, but others gave the orders.’

‘They were not my friends.’

Glokta snorted. ‘Please. Friends are people one pretends to like in order to

make life bearable. Men like us have no need of such indulgences. It is our enemies by which we are measured.' *And here are mine.* Sixteen steps confronted him. *That old, familiar flight.* Cut from smooth stone, a little worn towards the centre.

'Steps. Bastard things. If I could torture one man, do you know who it would be?' Pike's face was a single, expressionless scar. 'Well, never mind.' Glokta struggled to the bottom without incident, limped on a few more painful strides to a heavy wooden door, bound with iron.

'We are here.' Glokta slid a bunch of keys from the pocket of his white coat, flicked through them until he found the right one, unlocked the door, and went in.

Arch Lector Sult was not the man he used to be. *But then none of us are, quite.* His magnificent shock of white hair was plastered greasily to his gaunt skull, dry blood matted in a yellow-brown mass on one side. His piercing blue eyes had lost their commanding sparkle, sunken as they were in deep sockets and rimmed with angry pink. He had been relieved of his clothes, and his sinewy old man's body, somewhat hairy around the shoulders, was smeared with the grime of the cells. He looked, in fact, like nothing so much as a mad old beggar. *Can this truly once have been one of the most powerful men in the wide Circle of the World? You would never guess. A salutary lesson to us all. The higher you climb, the further there is to fall.*

'Glokta!' he snarled, thrashing helplessly, chained to his chair. 'You treacherous, twisted bastard!'

Glokta held up his white-gloved hand, the purple stone on his ring of office glinting in the harsh lamplight. 'I believe *your Eminence* is the proper term of address.'

'You?' Sult barked sharp laughter. 'Arch Lector? A withered, pitiable husk of a man? You disgust me!'

'Don't give me that.' Glokta lowered himself, wincing, into the other chair. 'Disgust is for the innocent.'

Sult glared up at Pike, looming menacingly over the table, his shadow falling across the polished case containing Glokta's instruments. 'What is this thing?'

'This is an old friend of ours, Master Sult, but recently returned from the wars in the North, and seeking new opportunities.'

'My congratulations! I never believed that you could find an assistant even more hideous than yourself!'

'You are unkind, but thankfully we are not easily offended. Let us call him equally hideous.' *And just as ruthless, too, I hope.*

'When will be my trial?'

'Trial? Why ever would I want one of those? You are presumed dead and I have made no effort to deny it.'

'I demand the right to address the Open Council!' Sult struggled pointlessly with his chains. 'I demand . . . curse you! I demand a hearing!'

Glokta snorted. 'Demand away, but look around you. No one is interested in listening, not even me. We all are far too busy. The Open Council stands in indefinite recess. The Closed Council is all changed, and you are forgotten. I run things now. More completely than you could ever have dreamed of doing.'

‘On the leash of that devil Bayaz!’

‘Correct. Maybe in time I’ll work some looseness into his muzzle, just as I did into yours. Enough to get things my own way, who knows?’

‘Never! You’ll never be free of him!’

‘We’ll see.’ Glokta shrugged. ‘But there are worse fates than being the first among slaves. Far worse. I have seen them.’ *I have lived them.*

‘You fool! We could have been free!’

‘No. We couldn’t. And freedom is far overrated in any case. We all have our responsibilities. We all owe something to someone. Only the entirely worthless are entirely free. The worthless and the dead.’

‘What does it matter now?’ Sult grimaced down at the table. ‘What does any of it matter? Ask your questions.’

‘Oh, we’re not here for that. Not this time. Not for questions, not for truth, not for confessions. I have my answers already.’ *Then why do I do this? Why?* Glokta leaned slowly forwards across the table. ‘We are here for our amusement.’

Sult stared at him for a moment, then he shrieked with wild laughter. ‘Amusement? You’ll never have your teeth back! You’ll never have your leg back! You’ll never have your life back!’

‘Of course not, but I can take yours.’ Glokta turned, stiffly, slowly, painfully, and he gave a toothless grin. ‘Practical Pike, would you be so good as to show our prisoner the instruments?’

Pike frowned down at Glokta. He frowned down at Sult. He stood there for a long moment, motionless.

Then he stepped forward, and lifted the lid of the case.

‘Does the devil know he is a devil?’
Elizabeth Madox Roberts

The Beginning

The sides of the valley were coated in white snow. The black road ran through it like an old scar, down to the bridge, over the river, up to the gates of Carleon. Black sprouts of sedge, tufts of black grass, black stones poked up through the clean white blanket. The black branches of the trees were each picked out on top with their own line of white. The city was a huddle of white roofs and black walls, crowded in around the hill, pressed into the fork in the black river under a stony grey sky.

Logen wondered if this was how Ferro Maljinn saw the world. Black and white, and nothing else. No colours. He wondered where she was now, what she was doing. If she thought about him.

Most likely not.

‘Back again.’

‘Aye,’ said Shivers. ‘Back.’ He hadn’t had much to say the whole long ride from Uffrith. They might have saved each other’s lives, but conversation was another matter. Logen reckoned he still wasn’t Shivers’ favourite man. Doubtful that he ever would be.

They rode down in silence, a long file of hard riders beside the black stream, no more than an icy trickle. Horses and men snorted out smoke, harness jingled sharp on the cold air. They rode over the bridge, hooves thumping on the hollow wood, on to the gate where Logen had spoken to Bethod. The gate he’d thrown him down from. The grass had grown back, no doubt, in the circle where he’d killed the Feared, then the snow had fallen down and covered it. So it was with all the acts of men, in the end. Covered over and forgotten.

There was no one out to cheer for him, but that was no surprise. The Bloody-Nine arriving was never any cause for celebration, especially not in Carleon. Hadn’t turned out too well for anyone the first time he visited. Nor any of the times after. Folk were no doubt barred into their houses, scared that they’d be the first to get burned alive.

He swung down from his horse, left Red Hat and the rest of the boys to see to themselves. He strode up through the cobbled street, up the steep slope towards the gateway of the inner wall, Shivers at his shoulder. A couple of Carls watched him come. A couple of Dow’s boys, rough-looking bastards. One of them gave him a grin with half the teeth missing. ‘The king!’ he shouted, waving his sword in the air.

'The Bloody-Nine!' shouted the other, rattling his shield. 'King o' the Northmen!'

He crunched across the quiet courtyard, snow piled up into the corners, over to the high doors of Bethod's great hall. He raised his hands and pushed them creaking open. It wasn't much warmer inside than out in the snow. The high windows were open at the far end, the noise of the cold, cold river roaring from far below. Skarling's Chair stood on its raised-up platform, at the top of the steps, casting a long shadow across the rough floorboards towards him.

Someone was sitting in it, Logen realised, as his eyes got used to the dark. Black Dow. His axe and his sword leaned up against the side of the chair, the glint of sharpened metal in the darkness. Just like him, that. Always kept his weapons close to hand.

Logen grinned at him. 'Getting comfortable, Dow?'

'Bit hard on the arse, being honest, but it's better'n dirt for sitting in.'

'Did you find Calder and Scale?'

'Aye. I found 'em.'

'Dead, then, are they?'

'Not yet. Thought I'd try something different. We been talking.'

'Talking is it? To those two bastards?'

'I can think o' worse. Where's the Dogman at?'

'Still back there, trading words with the Union, sorting out an understanding.'

'Grim?'

Logen shook his head. 'Back to the mud.'

'Huh. Well, there it is. Makes this easier, anyway.' Dow's eyes flickered sideways.

'Makes what easier?' Logen looked round. Shivers was standing right at his shoulder, scowling as if he had someone's murder in mind. No need to ask whose. Steel gleamed beside him in the shadows. A blade, out and ready. He could've stabbed Logen in the back with time to spare. But he hadn't done, and he didn't now. It seemed as if they all stayed still for quite a while, frozen as the cold valley out beyond the windows.

'Shit on this.' Shivers tossed the knife away clattering across the floor. 'I'm better'n you, Bloody-Nine. I'm better than the pair o' you. You can get your own work done, Black Dow. I'm done with it.' He turned round and strode out, shoving his way past the two Carls from the gate, just now coming the other way. One of them hefted his shield as he frowned at Logen. The other one pulled the doors shut, swung the bar down with a final-sounding clunk.

Logen slid the Maker's sword out of its sheath, turned his head and spat on the boards. 'Like that, is it?'

'Course it is,' said Dow, still sat in Skarling's chair. 'If you'd ever looked a stride further than the end o' your nose you'd know it.'

'What about the old ways, eh? What about your word?'

'The old ways are gone. You killed 'em. You and Bethod. Men's words ain't worth much these days. Well then?' he called over his shoulder. 'Now's your chance, ain't it?'

Logen felt the moment. A lucky choice, maybe, but he'd always had plenty

of luck, good and bad. He dived sideways, heard the rattle of the flatbow at the same moment, rolled across the floor and came up in a crouch as the bolt clattered against the wall behind him. He saw a figure in the dark now, kneeling up at the far end of the hall. Calder. Logen heard his curse, fishing for another bolt.

‘Bloody-Nine, you broken dog!’ Scale came pounding out of the shadows, boots battering the floorboards, an axe in his great fists with a blade big as a cart-wheel. ‘Here’s your death!’

Logen stayed where he was, crouching loose and ready, and he felt himself smile. The odds were against him, maybe, but that was nothing new. It was almost a relief, not to have to think. Fine words and politics, none of that meant anything to him. But this? This he understood.

The blade crashed into the boards, sent splinters flying. Logen had already rolled out of the way. Now he backed off, watching, moving, letting Scale cleave the air around him. The air healed quick, after all. The next blow flashed sideways and Logen dodged back, let it chop a great lump of plaster from the wall. He stepped in closer as Scale snarled again, his furious little eyes bulging, ready to swing his axe round in a blow to split the world.

The pommel of the Maker’s sword crunched into his mouth before he got the chance, jerked his head up, spots of black blood and a chunk of white tooth flying. He staggered back and Logen followed him. Scale’s eyes rolled down, axe going up high, opening his bloody mouth to make another bellow. Logen’s boot rammed hard into the side of his leg. His knee bent back the wrong way with a sharp pop and he dropped to the boards, axe flying from his hands, his roar turning to a shriek of pain.

‘My knee! Ah! Fuck! My knee!’ He thrashed on the floor, blood running down his chin, trying to kick his way back with only one good leg.

Logen laughed at him. ‘You bloated pig. I warned you, didn’t I?’

‘By the fucking dead!’ barked Dow. He sprang up out of Skarling’s chair, axe and sword in his hands. ‘If you want a thing done fucking right, you’d best get ready to set your own hand to it!’

Logen would’ve liked to stab Scale right through his fat head, but there were too many other men needed watching. The two Carls were still standing by the door. Calder was loading up his next bolt. Logen sidled into space, trying to keep his eye on all of them at once, and Dow most of all. ‘Aye, you faithless bastard!’ he shouted. ‘Let’s have you!’

‘Faithless, me?’ Dow snorted as he came on slow down the steps, one at a time. ‘I’m a dark bastard, aye, I know what I am. But I’m nothing to you. I know my friends from my enemies. I never killed my own. Bethod was right about one thing, Bloody-Nine. You’re made of death. If I can put an end to you, d’you know what? That’ll be the best thing I’ve done in my life.’

‘That all?’

Dow showed his teeth. ‘That, and I’m just plain sick o’ taking your fucking say-so.’

He came on fast as a snake, axe swinging over, sword flashing across waist high. Logen dodged the axe, met the blade with his own, metal clanging on metal. Dow caught him in his sore ribs with his knee and sent him gasping back towards the wall, then came at him again, blades leaving bright traces in

the darkness. Logen sprang out of the way, rolled and came up, strutting out into the middle of the hall again, sword hanging loose from his hand.

'That it?' he asked, smiling through the pain in his side.

'Just getting the blood flowing.'

Dow leaped forward, made to go right and came left instead, sword and axe sweeping down together. Logen saw them coming, weaved away from the axe, turned the sword off his own and stepped in, growling. Dow jerked back as the Maker's blade hissed through the air right in front of his face, stumbled away a step or two. His eye twitched, some red leaking down his cheek from a nick just under it. Logen grinned, spun the grip of his sword round in his hand. 'Blood's flowing now, eh?'

'Aye.' Dow gave a grin of his own. 'Just like old times.'

'I should've killed you then.'

'Damn right you should've.' Dow circled round him, always moving, weapons gleaming in the cold light from the tall windows. 'But you love to play the good man, don't you? Do you know what's worse than a villain? A villain who thinks he's a hero. A man like that, there's nothing he won't do, and he'll always find himself an excuse. We've had one ruthless bastard make himself King o' the North, and I'll be damned before I see a worse.' He feinted forward and Logen jerked back.

He heard the click of Calder's flatbow again and saw the bolt flash right between them. Dow scowled over at him. 'You trying to kill me? You loose another bolt and you're spitted, you hear?'

'Stop pissing around and kill him, then!' snapped Calder, cranking away at his flatbow.

'Kill him!' bellowed Scale, from somewhere in the shadows.

'I'm working at it, pig.' Dow jerked his head at the two Carls by the door. 'You two going to pitch in or what?' They looked at each other, none too keen. Then they came forward into the hall, their round shields up, their eyes on Logen, herding him towards one corner.

Logen bared his teeth as he backed off. 'That's how you'll get it done, is it?'

'I'd rather kill you fair. But kill you crooked?' Dow shrugged his shoulders. 'Just as good. I ain't in the business o' giving chances. Go on then! At him!'

The two of them closed in, cautious, Dow moving off to the side. Logen scrambled back, trying to look scared and waiting for some kind of chance. It wasn't long coming. One of the Carls stepped a touch too close, let his shield drop low. He chose a bad moment to raise his axe and a bad way to do it. There was a click as the Maker's sword took his forearm off, left it hanging from his elbow by a scrap of chain-mail. He stumbled forward, dragging in a great wheezing breath, making ready to scream, blood spurting out of the stump of his arm and splattering on the boards. Logen chopped a great gash out of his helmet and he dropped down on his knees.

'Gwarghh . . .' he muttered, blood pouring down the side of his face. His eyes rolled up to the ceiling and he flopped on his side. The other Carl jumped over his body, roaring at the top of his lungs. Logen caught his sword, their blades scraping together, then he barged into the man's shield with his shoulder, sent him sprawling on his arse. He gave a wail, the Carl, one boot sticking up. Logen swung the Maker's sword down and split that foot in half

up to his ankle.

Quick footsteps came up under the Carl's shriek. Logen spun, saw Black Dow charging at him, face crushed up into a killing grin.

'Die!' he hissed. Logen lurched away, the blade just missing him on one side, the axe on the other. He tried to swing the Maker's sword but Dow was too quick and too clever, shoved Logen back with his boot and sent him staggering.

'Die, Bloody-Nine!' Logen dodged, parried, stumbled as Dow came on again, no pauses and no mercy. Steel glinted in the darkness, blades lashing, killing blows, every one.

'Die, you evil fucker!' Dow's sword chopped down and Logen only just brought his own round in time to block it. The axe came out of nowhere, up from underneath, clattered into the crosspiece and tore Logen's blade spinning from his numb hand. He wobbled back a couple of strides and stood, heaving in air, sweat tickling at his neck.

It was quite a scrape he was in. He'd been in some bad ones alright, and lived to sing the songs, but it was hard to see how this could get much worse. Logen nodded towards the Maker's sword, lying on the boards just next to Dow's boot. 'Don't suppose you fancy giving a man a fair chance, and letting me have that blade, eh?'

Dow grinned wider than ever. 'What's my name? White Dow?'

Logen had a knife to hand, of course. He always did, and more than one. His eyes flickered from the notched blade of Dow's sword to the glinting edge of his axe and back. No amount of knives were going to be a match for those, not in Black Dow's hands. Then there was Calder's flatbow still rattling away as he tried to load the bastard thing again. He wouldn't miss forever. The Carl with the split foot was dragging himself squealing towards the door, on his way to let some more men in and finish the job. If Logen stood and fought he was a dead man, Bloody-Nine or not. So it came to a choice between dying and a chance at living, and that's no choice at all.

Once you know what has to be done, it's better to do it, than to live with the fear of it. That's what Logen's father would have said. So he turned towards the tall windows. The tall, open windows with the bright white sunlight and the cold wind pouring through, and he ran at them.

He heard men shouting behind, but he paid them no mind. He kept running, breath hissing, long strips of light wobbling closer. He was up the steps in a couple of bounds, flashed past Skarling's Chair, faster and faster. His right foot clomped down on the hollow floorboards. His left foot slapped down on the stone window sill. He sprang out into empty space with all the strength he had left, and for a moment he was free.

Then he began to fall. Fast. The rough walls, then the steep cliff face flashed past – grey rock, green moss, patches of white snow, all tumbling around him.

Logen turned over slowly in the air, limbs flailing pointlessly, too scared to scream. The rushing wind whipped at his eyes, tugged at his clothes, plucked the breath out of his mouth. He'd chosen this? Didn't seem like such a clever choice, right then, as he plunged down towards the river. But then say one thing for Logen Ninefingers, say that—

The water came up to meet him. It hit him in the side like a charging bull,

punched the air out of his lungs, knocked the sense out of his head, sucked him in and down into the cold darkness . . .

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You can put away the instruments.

I confess . . .

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